

**REPRESENTING DEAF CULTURE IN 'THROUGH DEAF EYES': PRODUCTION-LEVEL  
DECISION-MAKING AND THE INFLUENCES ON CULTURAL REPRESENTATION ON PUBLIC  
TELEVISION**

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The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to my parents, Janet and Steven Neckyfarow, who taught me the value of curiosity and higher education. I would also like to express my thanks to family and friends, professors and advisors, and all of those who have provided patience, kindness and understanding during this life challenge.

With much gratitude,  
Karen Neckyfarow

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## EXAMINING ‘DEAF’ IN CULTURAL THEORY AND MEDIA PRACTICE

### INTRODUCTION

In 1902 the American Mutoscope & Biography Company produced a film entitled *Deaf Mute Girl Reciting the “Star Spangled Banner”* in which a girl presents this traditional ode to American patriotism in her own language, American Sign Language.<sup>1</sup> This short film is likely the first portrayal of deaf culture through a televisual medium, in this case early silent film, not long after moving pictures were invented and around the same period that the medium became popular to mass audiences. Since this point, deafness, deaf life, and the experiences of other cultural minorities in the United States have proliferated across televisual media and genres.

The 2007 documentary *Through Deaf Eyes*, a film produced by Florentine Films/Hott Productions and WETA Washington, DC in collaboration with Gallaudet University, is an attempt to present deaf history and culture to a substantial public broadcasting audience of both deaf and hearing individuals in a way that examines that spectrum of opinion on a variety of historical topics within the deaf community. The producers of this film utilized a variety of representational techniques to present a considerably ‘balanced’ view of the historical conditions of deaf life and the present issues that exist for deaf people, their family, and their friends. The decisions that the producers made during the production of *Through Deaf Eyes* affect how the deaf minority in the United States is presented to and received by American audiences.

This project examines the deaf cultural communities as a minority in mainstream American society through the characteristics of presentation in the public television

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<sup>1</sup> This film, reprinted by the Library of Congress in 1955, is reproduced as an extra on the *Through Deaf Eyes* DVD.

documentary *Through Deaf Eyes*. It problematizes the condition of the deaf community from the perspective of post-colonial theory, a body of theoretical work that examines the ways that minorities are enabled to speak for themselves. In addition, this project looks towards visual and media ethnography to explore the ethics and politics behind representation of cultural groups from a production-side perspective. Finally, it acknowledges how public television as a medium and institution effects the representation of this unique cultural community. These sections will provide a greater understanding of the factors that affect how documentary film producers create representations of the deaf cultural minority, portrayals that contribute to the public's education of a little known cultural group that is often misunderstood and discriminated against. The factors uncovered provide evidence that given the variety of perspectives within a cultural community no representation will be perfect, however careful consideration can help producers provide audiences with points-of-view that present the many sides of internal cultural contentions, as well as voices that cautiously balance the public's own pre-conceived notions..

### **DEAF CULTURE, DEAF LIFE, DEAF WORLDS**

The progression of the film *Through Deaf Eyes* will be explored in later chapters in reference to the ways that the producers of the film went about creating a representation of the history of American deafness and deaf culture. It is necessary to have a clear picture of the history of this topic in order to fairly evaluate the decisions made by the producers of the film in construction their portrayal of the deaf community; the history of the community, the issues that are most important and controversial within

the community, and the presentations of the community that were offered to audiences of ‘outsiders’ prior to *Through Deaf Eyes*.

According to studies compiled by the Gallaudet Research Institute, approximately 600,000 functionally-deaf individuals live in the United States. In addition, there are over 35 million people who report some degree of hearing difficulty.<sup>2</sup> These statistics describe a pathology, a physiological condition of deafness or being ‘hard-of-hearing’, and according to some, a disability. Among individuals with this condition, there is a community that has evolved in the past couple of centuries in conjunction with a unique language (American Sign Language), educational objectives, technologies, and spirited identity and cultural bonds that transcends the medical condition with which they are identified by the ‘outside world’ of the hearing. These factors contribute to an expansive culture that, within the deaf community, it is called a variety of things, including deaf culture, deaf life or the deaf world.

Deaf culture is a concept that differs from many of the common conceptions of culture; most often Western high culture (symphonies, renaissance masterpieces), American popular culture (punk movements, boy bands, advertising), or cultural ‘others’ from distant locations in the world (tribal groups in Africa depicted in such programs as the Discovery Channel’s *Going Tribal*). Television documentaries, dramas, comedies, and reality programs regularly portray distant cultures and cultural ‘others’ that viewers will come in contact with in their own communities. While rare, this sometimes includes portrayal of deaf people.

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<sup>2</sup> Gallaudet Research Institute, “How many deaf people are there in the United States?” October 11, 2007, <http://gri.gallaudet.edu/Demographics/deaf-US.php>.

There are two major ways to talk about deafness. The first is pathological: a government recognized disability covering the physiological inability for the body to hear and/or process sounds normally. The second is a social construction, a linguistic minority, or a unique community that communicates in its own exclusive ways. Harlan Lane, a professor of psychology and advocate of the deaf, discusses the divergences in these two constructions of deafness. For Lane, deafness is just one in a long line of social problems that are constructed and emphasized in the popular imagination standing with such issues as alcoholism, child abuse, and homosexuality.<sup>3</sup> The two competing constructions of deafness are not completely at odds with each other; however the struggle between the two camps, both backed by significant national organizations, has a long history that provides complexity identity formation for individuals who are deaf or hard-of-hearing.<sup>4</sup>

Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, prominent deaf academics and scholars in language and society, recount an interaction with an acquaintance that highlights the how deaf people struggle with these two competing parts of their identity. This individual actively takes advantage of the opportunities provided to him for being legally handicapped, including reduced fare on public transportation. Despite these benefits, he is uncomfortable identifying himself as disabled to his deaf friends as deaf culture has not embraced the notion of deafness as a handicap.<sup>5</sup> This example provides insight how complicated it is for deaf individuals to formulate their own identities; continually

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<sup>3</sup> Lane, Harlan. "Construction of Deafness." In *The Disability Studies Reader*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 79.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 80-81.

<sup>5</sup> Padden, Carol, and Tom Humphries. *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 43-44.

moving between being part of a unique community of likely affected individuals and being an individual with a physical abnormality. This distinction acknowledges that beyond personal identification, the labeling of the deaf as institutionally protected disabled people, are considered separate and stigmatized because of the policies that are enacted in their favor rather than united within their social community.

The interdisciplinary field of Disability Studies is the main source of academic discourse on deafness as pathology. This field includes other human abnormalities including mental disabilities, physical deformities, chronic illness, and many other ‘afflictions’ of the body. Harlan Lane describes this type of construction as ‘disability-as-impairment’, which victimizes the disabled by setting them up as lacking an innate human ability. He provides an example of a deaf girl who was presented on the popular television program *60 Minutes* “as a victim of personal tragedy, utterly disabled in communication by her loss of hearing but enabled by technology.”<sup>6</sup> The author goes on to describe how the intention of representations of the deaf as having ‘disability-as-impairment’ is a way to promote normalcy in hearing ability through such measures as implants and surgeries.

Lane’s example illuminates one way that the physiological description of deafness is represented on television. There are many in the deaf community, that believe this portrayal is neither ideal nor welcome; they believe that ‘disability-as-impairment’ does not mean deficiency, but instead provides value through uniqueness, specifically as a linguistic minority. Lane describes the ways that the deaf laud their culture and abilities as positive, to the degree that “Expectant Deaf parents..., commonly hope to have Deaf

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<sup>6</sup> Lane (2006), 81.

children with whom they can share their language, culture, and unique experiences.”<sup>7</sup>

Many deaf Americans do not subscribe to the commonly held ‘hearing’ assertion that those who are deaf would prefer to be able to hear. Deaf culture, and its language, customs, and community, deserves adequate representation in the media in order to combat mainstream ideology on ‘disability-as-impairment’.

This other construction of deafness, the cultural construction or what Lane calls the ‘Linguistic Minority Construction’, has become well established in the deaf community over time, aided by such forces as the representation of the deaf by linguists, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists. The voices of a large and active deaf population provide their own presentation of deaf culture through a continual fight against inequality in the legacy of the civil rights movement.<sup>8</sup> In their own rights, *Through Deaf Eyes* and the exhibition *History Through Deaf Eyes* that the film was conceived from have played a significant role in transmitting representations of deaf culture and history to large audiences. Finally, literary and academic works, such as *A Place of their Own*, provide meaning to this second degree of ‘deaf’ through detailed histories of the deaf community. This work, by Gallaudet professors John V. Van Cleve and Barry A. Crouch, approaches deaf history from a variety of viewpoints from medical history and religious prophecies to educational experiences, political organizing, linguistic preservation, and even economic considerations.<sup>9</sup>

Van Cleve and Crouch describe the purpose of this textual project as one of uncovering historical documents that would explain, “how it was that deaf people in the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 88-90.

<sup>9</sup> Van Cleve, John Vickrey, and Barry A. Crouch. *A Place of Their Own: Creating the Deaf Community in America*. (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1989).

United States had created a language and a community that had persisted for two centuries.”<sup>10</sup> The strong history of this community has been a contributing factor in its cohesion and activity. In their most recent publication, Carol Padden and Tom Humphries describe the change in deaf culture studies over the past few decades as one of reframing “the idea of being Deaf” and exploring “Deaf people’s long tradition of language and history as a way of understanding their lives.”<sup>11</sup> The importance of this statement is twofold: first, it acknowledges that history and language are the two entry points for understanding the culture of the deaf, and second, it reinforces that deafness can be and is represented in terms of its culture. The movement from a world-view based upon pathology and victim-hood to one of a rich culture of language, history, collaboration, education, and expression is one that is exhibited not only in academic works and personal narratives, but in mainstream representations of the deaf including news footage from the “Deaf President Now” campaign at Gallaudet University, feature films, and documentaries including *Through Deaf Eyes*.

Of all of the media that are utilized to represent deafness, film and television are the prominent mass media of interest. John Schuchman, a deaf activist and former Professor of History at Gallaudet University, argues that film media and deafness are interrelated because films “have represented an important source of public information about deafness and how deaf people related to the larger society of people who hear.” It is because of film, that audiences tend to think of the deaf as victims.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, viii.

<sup>11</sup> Padden, Carol, and Tom Humphries. *Inside Deaf Culture*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> Schuchman, John S. *Hollywood Speaks: Deafness and the Film Entertainment Industry*. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 3.

The relationship between deafness and film has been varied. In the silent film era, deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals were equal audience participants and a few deaf actors, including Granville Redmond, appeared in the films.<sup>13</sup> Deafness was also widely used as a subject matter in silent film. It was the silent film era that brought about the stereotype of the ‘dummy’, a character that is considered lacking in mental capacity due to inability to hear, speak, or understand the other characters. The ‘dummy’ is present in such films as *The Deaf Mute* and *The Silent Voice*, but surprisingly it also appears in *Deliverance*, a film produced by Helen Keller about her own life, where a less derogatory presentation of deafness would be expected.<sup>14</sup> It was not until the late 1940s that this stereotype began to change, beginning with the film *Johnny Belinda* (1948); the deaf began to be portrayed as human beings with feelings and worth to society “who happened to be deaf.”<sup>15</sup>

The portrayal of the deaf and disabled in feature film has not always been prominent and has typically followed the rather narrow and stereotypical depictions that have been described above. There are few high profile motion pictures that present images of deafness and disability though the numbers are increasing as the public becomes more conscious of ‘disabled’ minorities. Stephen Safran, a professor of Teacher Education at Ohio University, examines Academy-Award winning films to determine the prevalence of disability portrayal as a major theme. Safran attributes an increase in prevalence to a greater awareness because of the steadily increasing integration of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 21-23.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 30-31.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 53.

children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms.<sup>16</sup> The higher prominence of disability themes in filmic mass media allows for a greater discussion of the content of these films; exploring the extent to which negative stereotypes are included or emphasized and assessing how deaf and disabled physiologies and cultures are depicted in film and on television.

With an increase of discourse surrounding representations of deafness and disability in film and television those communities that are portrayed are increasingly calling for their voices to be heard. This call has been heard from other groups whose agency was stifled due to minority status, often in their own country. In the wake of global colonialism and imperialism these calls came from colonized people who wanted to speak for themselves regarding their personal cultural and colonial experiences. The field of cultural studies finds a great deal of insight in the struggles of colonized peoples to find their voices in a sea of ‘orientalists’, travel writers, and colonial advisors who created texts that contained only an outsider’s perception of the ‘native’ realities. In the deaf world, there is still a struggle for an insider’s perspective to be adequately communicated through the cacophony of ‘hearing’ voices. Post-colonial theory provides an entry point into this effort.

#### **A VOICE FOR AN AMERICAN CULTURAL MINORITY**

‘Other’ is a term that has deep roots within anthropological and post-colonial theory. It can be applied to anyone or anything that is categorically marked by difference. In deaf culture, ‘other’ is applied to the hearing world as a way to acknowledge the fundamental differences between the deaf and the hearing. Padden and

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<sup>16</sup> Safran, Stephen P. “Disability Portrayal in Film: Reflecting the Past, Directing the Future.” *Exceptional Children* 64, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 227-238.

Humphries describe a common experience in deaf children who grow up with deaf parents and siblings, the experience of finding the ‘other’. The authors describe deaf culture as having a ‘different center’ from that of the hearing world, where deaf individuals typically believe that their condition is ‘normal’ and that those who *can* hear (and often those who can *speak*) are the minority.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, for the majority of Americans, portrayals of deafness are considered the ‘other’. The concept of the ‘other’ is worthy of further exploration in order to help explain the complexity of representation of cultural difference on television and in other mass media representations.

In anthropology, theorists suggest that the use of categories helps people understand cultural difference and make order of the world around them. Structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss helped focus social science fields on the patterning and structure of human thought and social systems. He borrowed the notion of binary oppositions from Linguistics; a model that explores how the human mind constructs language contrasts like hot-cold and night-day. Lévi-Strauss and his followers utilized this model to describe contrasts in cultural ideologies such as the complicated notions of sacred-profane.<sup>18</sup> In the colonial period some contrasts, including binaries like ‘modern-primitive’ and ‘us-them’, were exploited in order for European powers to exercise control over and gain resources in less-developed areas.

Over time, there has been considerable discourse over the term ‘other’. During the colonial period and prior to the mass dissemination of information via modern media

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<sup>17</sup> Padden, Carol, and Tom Humphries. (1988), 15, 39-42.

<sup>18</sup> McGee, R. Jon, and Richard L. Warms. *Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History*. (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1996), 310-311.

technology (television, radio, and the Internet to name a few), audiences received messages about cultural ‘others’ through travelogues, literary representations, and spectacles of exhibition. Beginning in the mid- to late-1800s, colonial exhibitions brought racial and cultural ‘others’ to colonial countries (mainly France and Great Britain, but also Germany, Portugal and Belgium) to show the power and dominion that the world powers held over their colonies. Human zoos featuring colonized people in staged production of indigenous activities were set up to accentuate the difference and primitiveness of colonized people. Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, and Sandrine Lemaire determine that the purpose of representing the alterity of the colonized people in human zoos was to “measure the accomplishments of the colonial powers” for large-scale acceptance of imperialism.<sup>19</sup> The creation of the ideology of difference set up a power relationship between the colonizer as authority and its colonized people as subaltern that allowed for a grand history of representation of ‘otherness’ in western mediatic expression that continues to this day.

In the post-colonial period, ‘native’ academics began the tenuous task of challenging the representations that were created about them and their people by colonial governments, authors, and scholars. In his writings, Frantz Fanon problematizes the subjugated alterity that existed within the colonial condition. In *The Wretched of the Earth* he examines the issues of a binary structure of difference: “The Negroes of Chicago only resemble the Nigerians or the Tanganyikans in so far as they were all

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<sup>19</sup> Blanchard, Pascal, Nicolas Bancel, and Sandrine Lemaire, “From Human Zoos to Colonial Apotheoses: The Era of Exhibiting the Other,” [http://www.africultures.com/anglais/articles\\_anglais/43blanchard.htm](http://www.africultures.com/anglais/articles_anglais/43blanchard.htm) (accessed 16 December 2007).

defined in relation to the whites.”<sup>20</sup> The binary oppositions black-white and self-other break down depending on who is included; who identifies themselves as 'black' or 'self'. In his later work *Black Skin White Masks* Fanon complicates this further by exploring the issue of the intermediary, an educated black man who becomes familiar with the white world in order to assert the value of his heritage. In educating himself in the white tradition and language, the intermediary then loses a part of the heritage that he is so intent of defending.<sup>21</sup> For Fanon, the being that exists between two cultures belongs in neither and no longer exists within the opposition of the them-us binary.

In response to Fanon’s writings on self and other in the colonial world, Homi K. Bhabha returns to a binary argument as he believes that “to exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness, its look or locus.”<sup>22</sup> Bhabha rejects the tendency for the West to produce and place importance on the binary oppositions that are inherently linked to power and domination. This being said, his intention in exploring these constructions is to destabilize the relationship of power in the binary, assigning no natural domination of one by the other. When these power relationships are broken down by the deconstruction of the binary categories, there is the possibility for multivocality in discourse, a condition that provides a spectrum of viewpoints that can explain the continuum of cultural experience.

Fanon and Bhabha’s assertions transcend their context and are increasingly relevant in the contemporary production of televisual media representations of minority groups and cultures. In America, minority cultures exist in constant interaction with both

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<sup>20</sup> Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1963), 216.

<sup>21</sup> Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1967), 17-40.

<sup>22</sup> Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. (London: Routledge, 1994), 44.

the dominant culture and those of a variety of other minority groups. Cultural minorities are largely assimilated into mainstream society and the technologies that are in fashion, but there are still conditions in the creation of mass mediated representations where the challenges of the intermediary (raised by Fanon) or of lack of multivocality (raised by Bhabha) of power-oriented binary oppositions come into play.

In deaf culture, many individuals are educated in mainstream schools and interact with individuals who are not deaf. Like Fanon's intermediary, these individuals straddle the deaf and hearing worlds without being able to transcend their lack of hearing to fully complete the "jump" to the majority culture. This statement also shows the shortfalls of the binary self-other and deaf-hearing, assuming that the deaf would always rather be a part of the hearing world than the deaf world. The alterity of the 'other' still exists in the assumption of a better-worse binary where the self can believe his own condition to be better than that that of the 'other'.

The roots of this inflation of self over other are the premise of stereotyping. In "The Spectacle of the 'Other'" Stuart Hall claims that "stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature."<sup>23</sup> In this chapter, Hall examines a variety of representations of ethnic 'others', specifically representations of Africans and African-Americans in mainstream media where black is offset by its lack of whiteness, a notion of skin color that is noticeable and easily recognizable. Hall states that stereotypes serve to exaggerate or simplify traits like skin color that "reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes 'difference'."<sup>24</sup> Stereotypes are

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<sup>23</sup> Hall, Stuart. "The Spectacle of the 'Other'." In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 257.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 258.

representations that contribute to “the maintenance of social and symbolic order.” They are created in spaces where there is a high degree of inequality with regards to power, and where that difference in power requires constant reinforcement.<sup>25</sup> Over time, these stereotyped representations become naturalized and contribute to the inability for the powerless to speak for themselves.<sup>26</sup>

Response to the issues of cultural representation is so important in light of conditions of stereotyping and enactment of a colonial-like power over a disenfranchised minority. When a majority is given the power to speak for a minority, assumptions come through in the representation, which then perpetuates the power relationship. A minority culture in American society usually has access and education to utilize the technology of the overarching society. Minorities are able and allowed to go to school and learn about filmmaking, broadcasting, and web design in order to create their own self-representations, and via the internet they are offered opportunities to publish the different types of media texts that they create, but they may not be given equal access to distribute their productions to *mass* audiences and get their position out to the degree and diversity of audience that they would need to enact large scale change as they compete with representations that are created by non-minorities at mass media institutions for much larger audiences.

The independent filmmakers that created the ‘shorts’ provided in *Through Deaf Eyes* were educated in the craft at a variety of deaf and non-deaf educational institutions. Some have had a degree of success presenting and promoting their work, however

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 258-261.

<sup>26</sup> Literature on this includes Gaytri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.

without attachment to a prominent hearing filmmaker such as Lawrence Hott from Hott Productions, it is unlikely that they would have received the necessary funding and access to create a major public broadcasting production. This may be an institutional failure in providing equal access, but it is also a reality. As such, understanding the process of producing these mass media representations, the voices presented, and the implications of authority become vital to determining the efficacy of a film.

### **PROBLEMATIZING ‘REPRESENTATION’**

Over time, a broad number of fields have become concerned with theories of ‘representation’, particularly those where dissemination of cultural knowledge is a central tenet. Media studies provides context for representation in terms of how information presented to mass audiences is transmitted through a medium. Moving further, visual ethnography provides an entry point into the complexity of creating representation in discourse within the field concerned with the ethics of how to portray cultural ‘others’ in produced texts. Through theories from Media Studies and Visual Ethnography, this section clarifies the usage of the term ‘representation’ and explores the variety of ways that theories of representation can be used to explain how cultural minorities are portrayed and received by mass audiences. The film *Through Deaf Eyes* provides a case-study for access to these theories of ‘representation’ and the ways that they can be applied to media representations; exploring how films are created and with the understanding that they affect public opinion about cultural minorities, specifically deaf and disabled minorities.

Mass media productions, like *Through Deaf Eyes*, are means of communicating knowledge and information pertaining to a cultural subject matter to large audiences.

Audiences are presented with cultural knowledge about the deaf world through portrayals of deaf people, interactions and histories, portrayals that exist as representations of the culture. In order to determine the factors that go into this cultural portrayal, it is important to understand what ‘representation’ entails as a media concept. For Lawrence Grossberg and his colleagues, professors of media, journalism, and communication at a variety of universities across the country, representation is a re-presentation, where the role of the producer is “to take an original, mediate it, and ‘play it back’.”<sup>27</sup> A primary source of knowledge, a ‘real’ which exists in the natural world, is submitted to a process of mediation and then ‘played back’ to audiences that receive the communication. The authors question the term ‘representation’ in terms of ‘reality’ stating:

Representation involves making a claim on and about reality; but it is not the same as realism... the producer of a text will try to maximize the experience and impact of the text on the audience by drawing the audience into the universe that the text has created.<sup>28</sup>

The product of a mass media communication is an illusion of realism; for audiences this information is presented as a primary source of knowledge and they do not see or decipher the illusion. *Through Deaf Eyes* cannot present the ‘real’ experience of being part of the deaf community, but instead it presents a mediated version of that reality. The layer of mediation removes the audience from the reality of cultural experience leaving them with only a view or glimpse into the community. Audiences may take the film at face value and assume that the experience of the film is primary experience, not constructed by the creators of the televisual text.

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<sup>27</sup> Grossberg, Lawrence, et al. *MediaMaking: Mass Media in a Popular Culture*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006), 195.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 195.

These creators struggle with how to make this illusion seamless. According to the writers of *Media Making*, “producers have to try to hide their own presence in and operation on the text” in order to make the text seem real to audiences.<sup>29</sup> The removal of the producer from the representation’s reception makes the illusion complete by creating a more believable product and removing accountability for the representation. In times where truthfulness is necessary, it is vital for the construction of the ‘representations’ to be transparent to audiences. *Through Deaf Eyes* uses a variety of stylistic devices in order present the public television audience with a perception of truthfulness; interviews and short films within the documentary provide voices to the deaf in attempts to diminish illusion and remain closer to the ‘reality’ of the deaf experience. In this way, the film shadows the goals of ethnographic text production; to create a representation of cultural knowledge and experience where the role of the producer in the construction of the mediation is transparent.

In *Through Deaf Eyes*, audience reception of the ideas about deafness and deaf culture is determined by the choices that producers and editors made. Decision-making by the documentary producers directly affects the extent to which audiences internalize more measured views of deafness focusing less on inability and more on cultural uniqueness. Televisual ‘representation’ of this population has the ability to combat issues of stereotype and stigma and alter perceptions that the hearing world has about deafness. A more thorough account of the unique features of deaf culture is available to audiences when the association between ‘representation’ and the reality of deaf experience is transparent.

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<sup>29</sup> Grossberg, et al. (2006), 195,

In viewing the film *Through Deaf Eyes*, it is evident that there are a variety of ways to initiate a representation of a cultural ‘other’. When such a representation is necessitated the producer actively chooses the voices that will be present in the text; creation of a single-viewed representation by an elite group of film personnel, collaboration with a variety of voices, or influence over individuals within a culture to present their personal experience themselves. *Through Deaf Eyes* addresses all of these listed alternatives. Any of the individual voices that provide influence over a representation can be problematic, as there will always be gaps between the ‘reality’ of experience and what is represented in a text. An outside view, or a perspective that includes a variety of views that are reduced to a single stated experience can provide too limited a view of cultural life. Self-representation by those within a culture may be too personal and specific of a message to present in a text. There are always issues of influence, bias, and mediation that exist in the production of ethnographic or ‘indigenous’ works. Determining whether the scheme for representing deaf culture in *Through Deaf Eyes* is appropriate can be informed by the discourse in media ethnography that focuses on the relationship between authority and subject.

There are quite a few overarching questions that stand at the forefront of research into media representations. The primary one, “who should represent a culture?” has presented decades of debate within the social sciences. Should an anthropologist represent a culture that they are studying to an audience of students? Should a television producer present an indigenous or minority culture to their mainstream cable or broadcast audiences? Should the indigenous or minority culture strive to represent itself through a representative or a collaborative effort to any number of audiences that might be

interested in gaining knowledge about that cultural group? And then, what are the results of a representation when one or another of these parties creates it for any of these audiences? In the field of visual and media anthropology, many of these questions have been explored and debated.

Since the 1960s anthropologists and ethnographic filmmakers have created representations of a variety of cultures for television, working with or as producers of television programming.<sup>30</sup> Faye Ginsburg, a professor of Culture and Media and author of the 1992 article “Television and the Mediation of Culture,” explores the cases of the *Disappearing World*, a program from Granada Television (ITV) that included a great deal of collaboration from top ethnographic filmmakers including Jean Rouch and David and Judith MacDougall, and other collaborative efforts between ethnographic and mainstream producers in the United Kingdom. While clearly advocating for ethnographic production in the mass media, Ginsburg also highlights the problems inherent in the collaboration between mass media productions and ethnographic filmmakers. Producers are “clearly shaped by the ideological, material and institutional arrangements, and historical location of the television stations where they work.”<sup>31</sup> According to Ginsburg, *Disappearing World* was a crossover success that garnered the high ratings and awards that networks seek, while retaining the rigor of ethnography, a success that she attributes jointly to a period in documentary production when

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<sup>30</sup> Ginsburg, Faye. “Television and the Mediation of Culture: Issues in British Ethnographic Film.” *Visual Anthropology Review* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1992), 97.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

experimentation was encouraged, and to the ITV platform that allowed for greater freedom away from the dependency on sponsorship and advertising.<sup>32</sup>

In the United States there has not been a similar tradition of collaboration between ethnographers and mass media television producers. Here, the concern of media anthropology more than getting ethnographic film disseminated, it centers on what it means to *produce* ethnographic media. In the early 1990s, Debra Spitulnick argued for a greater focus on mass media institutions in anthropological study, as “mass media themselves have been a contributing force in [the] processes of cultural and disciplinary deterritorialization.”<sup>33</sup> In this call-to-action, Spitulnick asks a variety of questions that explore ways that mass media interact with culture: the ways that the mass media act to form or change culture and the ways that mass media represent culture by being a “vehicle of culture.”<sup>34</sup> These two tenets form the basis of the study of cultural representation on television, a medium that has experimented vastly with how to present cultural distinctness and difference as a way to garner interest in programming.

In mass media television production, as discussed in the previous section, producers try to diminish their own presence in the message that is mediated and communicated to audiences. In ethnographic film, the illusion that network and cable producers laud is taboo. The discourse surrounding ethics of representation in ethnographic film and textual production asserts that the key to successful portrayal of cultural knowledge and experience is in the accuracy of the presentation and in the ability of the presentation to portray the reality with a degree of reflexivity. The struggle of

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 98-99.

<sup>33</sup> Spitulnick, Debra. “Anthropology and Mass Media.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22 (1993), 293.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 294-300.

ethnographic film is how to appropriately portray culture. The lessons learned in ethnographic practice can be utilized in production for broader audiences. Standards that have been loosely adopted by ethnographic practitioners through the discourse on representational ethics can be applied in the mass media.

Current interest in production-side analysis of mass media cultural representations may stem from questions raised by ethnographic practice. Ethnographers, as producers and distributors of cultural knowledge, have long struggled with how they should ‘translate’ knowledge from one cultural frame to another. As an academic community, these social scientists hold a degree of authority within the society that they participate, but their authority does not always extend to the community that they seek to represent. This academic community has undertaken almost three decades of self-reflexivity in terms of how they present the cultures that they study to the broader world, a practice that has come about in response to a ‘crisis of representation’. Sarah Pink, a noted British anthropologist who often guides the discourse on the future of visual anthropology and ethnographic practice, states that “the issues raised indeed made anthropologists think more carefully about how their texts are constructed.” Additionally, the ‘crisis of representation’ led to greater reflection upon power relationships between anthropologists and their subjects, truth claims, and the ways that anthropology as a cultural practice can be explored.<sup>35</sup>

These relationships of power and the ethics of representation can and should be applied both to ethnographic texts, and to mass media texts. Anthropologists and ethnographers did not produce *Through Deaf Eyes*, but even so, this film does exhibit the

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<sup>35</sup> Sarah Pink, *The Future of Visual Ethnography: Engaging the Senses* (London: Routledge, 2006), 13.

social knowledge of a minority group to cultural outsiders. The producers necessarily undertook research, observation, and ‘fieldwork’ in order to learn about the culture they present in the film and in this way they become surrogate anthropologists, holding a degree of authority as documentary film producers who have the ability to spread the knowledge they present to a large public broadcasting audience.

In Lucien Taylor’s introduction to *Transcultural Cinema*, he speaks of renowned ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall’s assertion that cultural representation in documentary should transparently present various voices:

... films should seek to divulge, in both style and substance, the “multiple voices” that contribute in different ways to their formation... filmmakers should not hoodwink themselves into pretending otherwise.<sup>36</sup>

This quote describes a much different condition than that of the mass media producer. For the mass media producer, the goal is an illusion to reality that will provide entertainment and education to the audience. The goal of the ethnographic film is quite the opposite. Instead of being accountable to the audience of the film, the ethnographer is accountable to the subject and must strive to represent the reality of experience as ‘reflectively’ and reflexively as possible. This means that ethnographers cannot discount their own influences and biases in the creation of the mediated representation.

Taylor’s description of ethnographic perspective on cultural representation comes from MacDougall’s own writings about the subjective voice in ethnographic film. The ‘subjective voice’ is a term that refers to the ethnographer’s goal of grasping the point-of-view of the culture that he or she is observing; that is to describe the world-view of a

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<sup>36</sup> Taylor, Lucien. “Introduction” to *Transcultural Cinema*, 3-21. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

culture from their own perspective or from the voice of the subject.<sup>37</sup> The subjective voice is problematic; it is “always mediated and fragmentary, however much it appears to be the independent voice of another person.”<sup>38</sup> MacDougall believes that the filmmaker has the only truly subjective voice in the production. This distinction is extremely important, as the only voice that the filmmaker can internalize or realize is his or her own. The voice of the subject of the representation is not just mediated through film or text, but also through the ethnographer creating a second degree of deferment of meaning. The challenge of ethnography and production of cultural representation is determining how to allow for a more prominent voice for the cultural subject of the text.

One way that documentary film and television have chosen to provide greater reality in the experience of the cultural ‘other’ is through utilization of indigenous filmmaking practices. In the 1980s, this type of representation came to the forefront of ethnographic politics due to the call from Australian Aboriginal people for a greater degree of representation of their cultural identity in the mass media.<sup>39</sup> Indigenous filmmaking became a means of allowing Aborigines to “speak for themselves” by being included as employees at ABC (The Australian Broadcasting Corporation) and by producing a regular series with Aboriginal directors and crew on topics that are relevant to that community, but that have a broad appeal.<sup>40</sup> This type of production brings typically ‘western’ forms of media technology to indigenous cultures for the purposes of

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<sup>37</sup> MacDougall, David. *Transcultural Cinema*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 93.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

<sup>39</sup> Ginsburg, Faye. “Station Identification: The Aboriginal Programs Unit of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.” *Visual Anthropology Review* 9, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 93

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 93-94.

visual self-representation. On the surface, this phenomenon seems both logical – in a globalizing world where access to technology is unprecedented for more cultural and socioeconomic groups – and beneficial to the understanding of the lesser-known facets of cultures that have not been widely represented through mainstream media. It is for these reasons that indigenous filmmaking has been advocated among ethnographers and other producers of cultural representations.

The fundamental problem with this logic according to James Weiner is that we do not account for a difference in perspective by cultures that do not have the same relationship with the “question of representation.” Weiner explains his argument as follows:

...I locate a serious exploration of the Western foundations of representation, visualism, and subjectivity... these foundations are integral to the filmic media themselves... and that they could be opposed to and even subversive of non-Western modes of knowledge and its acquisition, revelation, and articulation.<sup>41</sup>

In his writing, Weiner provides a variety of examples of ways that indigenous cultural groups around the world violate the principles of the foundations of the film medium because of standing and well-documented cultural principles. One instance that is specific to ‘representation’ conveys that the Avatip of Papua New Guinea are culturally bound to keep internal and sacred names and knowledge a secret. Historically, they have represented themselves through metaphor and allusion, techniques that are quite different from the realism associated with documentary film.<sup>42</sup> Other restrictions are less obvious. With deaf culture, though not an ethnic or indigenous culture, the association with

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<sup>41</sup> Weiner, James F. “Televisualist Anthropology: Representation, Aesthetics, Politics.” *Current Anthropology* 38, no. 2 (April 1997), 198.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 199.

televisual technology remains quite different from the more mainstream hearing culture for a variety of reasons. One obvious difference in television media usage for the deaf world is the relative exclusion of sound from the consumption experience. Reflection upon self-representation within the deaf community must address the issue of sound as a discrepancy between the normative and intentional usage of television communication and the non-normative use.

*Through Deaf Eyes* is unique in its commitment to experimentation with ways that the reality of deaf experience is presented to the audience. The tenets of indigenous filmmaking are present the inclusion of film shorts created by deaf filmmakers interspersed with traditional documentary techniques in this WETA production. Questioning the process of film production makes issues of subjectivity and use of the subjective voice transparent. The fundamentals of responsible cultural representation production come from the liminal spaces between mass media production and ethnographic production. The interdisciplinary review of cultural representation is valuable due to the authoritative voice of mass media.

*Through Deaf Eyes* and other televisual and mass media productions of cultural representations should be bound by ethical responsibility, but like most of what airs on television, these productions do not have the self-reflexive approach of visual ethnography. Despite this oversight, television still holds amazing power over the knowledge that audiences acquire about cultural 'others' including the deaf and disabled. The authors of *MediaMaking: Mass Media in a Popular Culture* describe the power of the media as such:

The media have the power to engage and entertain, to create and destroy, to open spaces and close them. Recognizing the context of the media

reminds us that their power depends on their relations with other practices and institutions and that, consequently, they do not wield their powers alone but share them with these other practices and institutions.<sup>43</sup>

The nature of *Through Deaf Eyes* as a public television presentation for mass audiences adds another dimension to the complexity of the representation of the deaf minority because of television's uniqueness as a medium and the association of the production with the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), a public institution.

### **MEDIA AND TELEVISION: THE EFFECTS ON REPRESENTATION**

*Through Deaf Eyes* is a difficult case study because it is a unique case. As a documentary film, it inherits some of the major aspects of ethnographic production that provide a more transparent representation of cultural experience. Additionally, as a television production for mass distribution via the PBS system its requirement to play for a particular audience, the requirements to air within 120 minutes during primetime, the airing on stations that broadcast to 100% of television households, and its necessity to gain public funding for its inception and distribution all add particular considerations to the ways that deaf history and contemporary experience are portrayed in the film. This section explores the variety of ways that these unique indicators contribute to cultural representation in how they determine the ability of this film to adequately represent the deaf world and how the institutional forces apply to give power to the producers to represent a community of people who identify as deaf.

In ethnographic representation, the relationship between the subject and the author of the ethnographic text is fairly simple and defined. In mass media representations, this relationship becomes more complicated. One of the most immediate

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<sup>43</sup> Grossberg, Lawrence, et al. *MediaMaking: Mass Media in a Popular Culture*. (Sage Publications, 2006), 28.

determinants for this complexity is that the nature of the relationship between producer and subject is quite different than in ethnographic textual production, relying on a bureaucracy that spans many departments and institutions. In mass media productions, the ‘producer’ is not one individual or even a small group of individuals, but instead is a collaboration between different units of business, a division of labor that includes groups of individuals with a variety of specialties of expertise who work in tandem to produce a broadcast. These groups can come from different institutions and can focus on any number of roles from acquiring funding and attempting to understand potential audiences through research to organizing funds and staff, writing the script, and editing the film.

Previous sections have examined the humanity that exists in a representation of a cultural minority, but there are additional factors that are involved in making decisions about these portrayals. For one, the technical and technological constraints of any medium utilized in the communication of cultural knowledge can impact the means of representation. Television provides just one example of a medium whose technical requirements place a large degree of influence upon producers of cultural representations.

Television as a medium contains multiple aspects of knowledge transmission. Like the telephone it receives sounds, but in addition it also receives transmissions of moving images. Originally, television access was provided via radio waves on particular frequencies, known as VHF (very high frequency) or UHF (ultra high frequency). In some ways, television provided many of the same functions as ‘the movies’, which combined moving pictures and sound to tell stories to audiences; however their method of transmission and reception is very different. Movies were only available to be seen at the cinema, a special location that housed appropriate equipment to play a ‘reel’ of film

shots in conjunction with a soundtrack. Television provided the same combination of images and sound, but transmitted directly into the home. In this way, television provided a means of access to a broad section of the population, and as these machines were lowered in price, the entry for access became much lower since the broadcasts were being transmitted over public airwaves.

The development of television and availability to a greater segment of the population provided a large public benefit as the airwaves are accessible to all. Even though airwaves are accessible to all and the entry for access to purchase a receiver was low, one cannot assume that all individuals were able to gain the same benefits from television.<sup>44</sup> For the deaf and hard-of-hearing, access to transmitted images was as simple as it would be for any other television viewer, but sounds were elusive and unavailable, and unlike early silent Hollywood films which were made to be understood without sound, the television stories were inaccessible without their audible components.

There are many reasons that it is important to be cognizant of the role of the producer in mediating knowledge. In American society it is almost impossible not to be influenced by the multitude of representations of culture from all manner of media. Occasionally, there are negative effects to these media representations, when audiences who receive the produced messages use that knowledge for unintended ends. Miscommunications can occur because the producer is using a different cultural code than the audience. Another explanation for this disparity exists when the subjectivity of

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<sup>44</sup> On February 17, 2009 television will again change with all ‘over-the-air’ transmission being sent through on a compressed, digital stream. Issues of access are currently being addressed by the Federal Communications Commission and other public entities to ensure that those individuals who access television without the aid of cable, satellite, or fiber optic transmission will have the appropriate equipment to convert the analog receivers on many older televisions to digital signals.

the producer comes through via bias or stereotype that is consciously or subconsciously used to reinforce a dominant power relationship. Other consequences can occur when the power of the medium itself is not carefully measured during the production process.

The process of media production relies heavily on the power of the medium to communicate the intended message and the power of the producing institution to create that message. Power, is “the ability to produce effects, to make a difference in the world.”<sup>45</sup> This definition can apply to the technology, the medium. The medium can change the way that users organize their time, the way they communicate, and how they reorganize the physical spaces in their lives where the technology becomes centered in homes and offices. The medium used in the communication of knowledge remains specific in its ability to transmit and translate knowledge between the producer and the consumer. According to Marshall McLuhan, “it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.”<sup>46</sup> McLuhan gives the mediating device, the technology, be it our voice, our pen, or our television due credit in the way that that device creates a causal reaction by a receiver of the message.

Television has been very effective in exercising this type of power over American culture. According to Mediamark Research, in 2006 television viewers watched on average over 60 half-hours (over 30 hours) of television programming each week, with almost 24 of those half hours (almost 12 hours) during Primetime.<sup>47</sup> When we consider that there are 168 hours in every week, we determine that about eighteen percent of our

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<sup>45</sup> Grossberg, Lawrence, et al., 28.

<sup>46</sup> McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994), 9.

<sup>47</sup> 2006 Doublebase Mediamark Research Inc. Estimates: ‘TV - Total: Number of half hours viewed in a week’, ‘TV - Primetime: Number of half hours viewed in a week in primetime’. Accessed April 4, 2007.

existence is spent watching television. This is a marked change in behavior from American daily life prior to commercial availability of this technology in the 1930s. Televisual technology exercised a type of power over consumers in order to reallocate their time and focus and to reconsider how they received their information and entertainment.

The producers of televisual representation hold a good amount of power over how cultural knowledge and experience is transmitted to audiences. They create representations of people, social groups, and different identities. As the authors of *MediaMaking* describe:

If someone has never seen any member of a particular group... than it is likely that what they think such people are like will be the result of what they have seen, heard, or read about them in the media.<sup>48</sup>

When producers allow their own biases to enter the production of a representation, stereotypes and generalizations that they communicate may become perpetuated and reinforced. While all stereotypes are not bad, presenting stereotypes in texts “implies that there is some ‘correct’ image of a social group’s identity,”<sup>49</sup> and reinforces the creation of hegemony or the “creation and maintenance of... a consensus” regarding the dominance of a particular depiction of a group of people.<sup>50</sup> Not only does this open the door for individuals who are stereotyped in the media to complain about the misrepresentation, but it can also have much more profound effects resulting from the way that individuals consume media and allow it to become a part of their behavior.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Grossberg, et al. (2006), 235.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 197.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 236, 297.

For the most part, American institutions that produce cultural representations for television hold a degree of oversight over the representations to ensure accuracy. One recent example includes the controversial departure of veteran news journalist Dan Rather from the CBS News team due to the lack of oversight on a story that he reported about President George W. Bush's National Guard service.<sup>52</sup> CBS News exercised their control over representation by firing four employees and refusing to resign Rather's contract. This incident is only one public exclamation by media organizations that displays a commitment to creating appropriate representations of individuals and social groups. Despite these assertions, one can only wonder whether public outcry encourages responsible representation-making and whether televisual news and entertainment organizations are truly committed to that cause.

Policies of media institutions and organizations aside, there are many unregulated aspects of media production, aspects that highlight the true and nuanced day-to-day power that the media holds over how audiences receive information. In her seminal work "Generating Newsworthiness", Marilyn Lester applies the sociological concept of 'gatekeeping' to the media apparatus. Described by Lester, "gatekeeping is a substantive application of a paradigm which views social action as primarily deriving from actors' orientation to, internalization of, and enactment of values, norms, and rules."<sup>53</sup> This definition and the paradigm that it describes, clearly express one internal process of

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<sup>52</sup> CBS News. "CBS Ousts 4 For Bush Guard Story, Independent Panel Faults 'Myopic Zeal' To Be 1st To Deliver Story," <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/01/10/national/main665727.shtml> (accessed 17 December 2007).

<sup>53</sup> Lester, Marilyn. "Generating Newsworthiness: The Interpretive Construction of Public Events." *American Sociological Review* 45, no. 6 (December 1980), 985.

decision making. Gatekeeping can be applied both to the sharing of news, or the creation of cultural depictions in the production of information for media distribution.

One major question that this paradigm brings to light is the degree to which producers fall under the mandates of their media organization. This uncovers an additional influence in representation by the leadership of the organizations, and the degree to which orientation, application, and enactment of values is intensely personal. Cases such as the Dan Rather example provided above lead mass media audiences to believe that gatekeeping is determined at the highest levels of leadership. In her participation at a print newsroom, Lester describes the small everyday decisions that news writers and editors make that determine the information that audiences are privy to, specifically the acts of creating “newsworthiness” and framing the news. Gatekeeping can also involve daily conversations about whether information is outdated, relevant, or even “boring.”<sup>54</sup> Editors, low-level managers, and staff reporters make many daily decisions that effect how audiences receive information from the selection of which stories are produced, to the way that they are produced, and finally to the way that they are framed. These subtle acts, made overt by Lester, prove that gatekeeping goes beyond organizational policies that can be regulated by the leadership.

Necessarily, each genre of televisual representation contains a different degree of oversight based on the intended communication. News may be more carefully guarded because of its claims to ‘truth in reporting’ where dramas or comedies have more leeway. Scripted programming contains an element of fiction may help defend producers against claims of misrepresentation. Documentaries, like news, are more closely associated with

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 991.

'reflective' representation, depictions that should closely mirror reality. Among other intended goals, the examination of *Through Deaf Eyes* will help determine the degree of oversight that exists in the representation of this minority culture in the public broadcasting institutional model. This film provides a unique opportunity to explore how the deaf minority culture is represented and the degree to which the power of the televisual media is abated in favor of a more cohesive and responsible portrayal.

### **CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS**

The fundamentals addressed in this chapter explore concepts of cultural representation the modern age through the media that entertain and educate the public. In the most contemporary of times, American day-to-day living and ideologies are informed by a variety of media; however, one prominent and lasting medium, television, continues to engage viewers despite the turn to more advanced and expressive technologies. Perhaps it is television's ability to represent and communicate both visually and aurally that allows it to remain as a ritual of American culture. Regardless, it is through this medium that a large portion of our cultural education takes place. The following chapters will explore the production *Through Deaf Eyes* to determine the processes are undertaken in order to retain an informed and accurate sensibility about a broadcast representation of deaf culture.

*Through Deaf Eyes* is an award-winning film that explores deaf culture through a variety of forms of representation including interviews with major figures in the deaf community, historical review of deaf culture, and presentation of self-representation by deaf filmmakers. Exploration the production process of this film will develop a better

understanding of the standard practices of production in the public broadcasting institution that determine how cultures are represented to mass audiences This case study will bring to light the degree to which the producers of televisual representations address the issues of representation described in this chapter,.

## READING TELEVISUAL TEXTS

### INTRODUCTION

Televsual texts, programs and films that are created for and distributed on television stations, provide a basis for exploring cultural representation. American dependence on television has been blamed for a variety of social ails; increased violence, rampant obesity, increased incidence of eating disorders, consumerism, and addiction have all been the subject of studies that explore the negative effects of viewing.<sup>55</sup> Despite the bad press attributed to this medium, millions of Americans still tune-in to broadcast or cable networks to be entertained, educated, and informed. While subject matter varies widely across the vast viewing options, many televisual texts provide insight into lesser known social conditions and cultures.

Deafness has been a minor subject of television and film since the beginning of moving pictures, but its prevalence, especially of deaf culture topics as defining subject matter, has increased steadily in recent years. In fact, since the broadcast of *Through Deaf Eyes* in spring of 2007, there have been many broadcast representations of deaf culture that have reached some of the highest shares of United States television audiences. On Superbowl Sunday, February 3, 2008, PepsiCo provided a commercial to air in one of the coveted pre-Superbowl game commercial breaks on FOX network that was initiated and written by EnAble, a community of deaf and disabled Pepsi workers.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Herr, Norman. "Television and Health," *Internet Resources to Accompany The Sourcebook for Teaching Science*. [http://www.csun.edu/science/health/docs/tv&health.html#tv\\_stats](http://www.csun.edu/science/health/docs/tv&health.html#tv_stats) (accessed 21 April 2008).

<sup>56</sup> NPR: Morning Edition. "Signs of the Times," January 30, 2008. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18532857&sc=emaf> (accessed 30 January 2008).

This commercial features deaf ‘actors’ and the subject was a familiar joke within the deaf community, one that was easily accessible to the hearing world, but that highlighted a commitment to deaf culture topics on mainstream television.

Previously, on April 3, 2007, NBC broadcast an episode of *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* entitled “Silencer” that looks inside the deaf world for inspiration on a tale of the murder of a surgeon. The episode, which debuted in primetime, explores cochlear implants and suggests that the topic is so controversial that it provides the basis for a murder case. Following in the footsteps of this broadcast, CBS aired an episode of the series *Cold Case* on March 30, 2008 with the title “Andy in C Minor” that also uncovers the murder of a long-missing deaf student who undertook cochlear implant surgery in order to restore his ability to hear in order to play the piano and become romantically involved with a hearing girl. These network broadcasts of popular programs show that the deaf community is indeed a valuable and interesting topic of representation to large-scale hearing audiences, and although the nature of the representation of the deaf community varied within each of these broadcasts, each took a stab at portraying the ‘reality’ of experience within the deaf community.

*Through Deaf Eyes* and *Sound and Fury*, two documentary-style films created for public broadcasting take the informative approach to deaf life experiences rather than exploring topics of concern within deaf communities in dramatic storytelling or humor. These films center on deaf topics with the intent to educate the public, a central focus of public broadcasting, and they follow a long tradition of topics of cultural exploration and enlightenment that have been featured on public television in the United States and abroad. The intention of this chapter is to look at the content of the film *Through Deaf*

*Eyes* in terms of how it represents the deaf community; through visual representations and structural and documentary features. This chapter provides examination of *Through Deaf Eyes*' representational features in direct comparison to another PBS documentary, *Sound and Fury*, and as it is placed these within a body of work that includes seminal feature films *Children of a Lesser God* and *Johnny Belinda*, and televisual representations on *Law & Order*, *Cold Case*, *The West Wing*, *The L Word*, PBS educational program *Sesame Street*, and the 2008 PepsiCo Super Bowl commercial "Bob's House." Exploring *Through Deaf Eyes* in context of recent and historical televisual production help determine the aspects of deaf culture that are most represented to the hearing world, which controversies in the deaf world require communication or clarification in the film, and what can constitute 'balance'. Examination of the two public broadcasting texts determines the subject matter that is most open to criticism by deaf viewers.

### **THE TELEVISUAL TEXTS**

Deaf culture is a topic of increasing importance in mainstream television in the United States. Analysis of these texts help determine ways that cultural representations can be more true to deaf experience, transparent in intent, and encompassing the range of views within the deaf world. *Through Deaf Eyes* is an informational and historically focused documentary that provides a basis for critique of dramatic and humorous representations. As an educational film that attempts a higher degree of cultural relativism and a well-rounded perspective it speaks to the ways that scripted primetime texts can become more mindful of their representations. This section will look at two

major public television texts, exploring the extent each source is rooted in a true experience of deaf culture.

### *THROUGH DEAF EYES*

The focus of this study is the representation of deaf the film *Through Deaf Eyes*, a 2007 documentary from Florentine Films/Hott Productions and WETA Washington D.C. which was distributed to and aired on PBS stations nationwide. This film is a documentary whose subjects are deaf culture, history, and the deaf experience. It is unique in comparison to many other representations of the deaf in that the explicit subject is the history of ‘the deaf’. This is a major difference from other documentaries, feature films, and television programs that instead objectify deaf culture and deaf individuals.

A student at Gallaudet University first conceived of *Through Deaf Eyes* as an exhibition that would explore the long and extremely important history of deafness in the United States.<sup>57</sup> This history had rarely been disseminated outside of the deaf community and was largely absent even within the community. In the late 1997 the idea was presented to Jean Bergey, the future project director for the *History Through Deaf Eyes* exhibition. Bergey enlisted the assistance of Doug Baynton, a historian in the deaf community to research and write the exhibit.<sup>58</sup> This began the project of compiling information and designing the exhibition. The exhibition concept was taken to the Smithsonian Institution where Bergey and other representatives from Gallaudet hoped to

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<sup>57</sup> The following history of the *History Through Deaf Eyes* exhibit was provided by Jean Bergey during a personal interview on February 11, 2008.

<sup>58</sup> University of Iowa News, “History Through Deaf Eyes' Exhibit Opens Nov. 4 at UI; Lecture Nov. 5,” *University News Service | The University of Iowa*, October 31, 2005, <http://www.news-releases.uiowa.edu/2005/october/103105deaf-history.html> (accessed 8 April 2008).

get assistance. Even at this point, the exhibition was highly controversial. A letter writing initiative nearly stalled the exhibition, causing the Smithsonian to reconsider its role in the project and eventually remove its support. At issue was the way that deafness was to be portrayed in the exhibition; unearthing the historical split between the oral and manual deaf communities. The letter writing campaign mainly centered upon the responsibility for the exhibition to present the experience of one camp or the other. Other letters brought about the first calls for ‘balance’ in representation of ‘deaf’, as one writer proclaims, “[the exhibition] should include perspectives from both the manual deaf community and the oral deaf community... to help create a balanced view of what it is like to be deaf today.”<sup>59</sup>

Ultimately, the exhibition came to fruition, exploring a chronological history of deafness in America from the founding of the first school for the deaf by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet in Connecticut, the inception of American Sign Language by French sign language practitioner Laurent Clerc through contemporary history and the technologies of the deafness and hearing including cochlear implants. The exhibition traveled on a twelve-city American tour which included the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC despite their withdrawal of initial support.<sup>60</sup>

At this point, Jean Bergey and then president of Gallaudet University I. King Jordan invited producers from WETA, a public broadcasting station in Washington, DC to attend the exhibition and explore the possibility of creating a public television

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<sup>59</sup> “Smithsonian Responsibility” letter (anonymous) provided by Jean Bergey, from a University of Virginia Presentation on *History Through Deaf Eyes*. According to Bergey, all letters of concern surrounding the *History Through Deaf Eyes* exhibition are housed in the Gallaudet University Archives.

<sup>60</sup> Douglas C. Baynton, Jack R. Gannon, and Jean Lindquist Bergey, *Through Deaf Eyes* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2007), viii.

production from the exhibition content. Karen Kenton and Dalton Delan, executive producers at WETA, accepted the project and began to search for a production team, settling on Hott Productions due to their experience in topics of historical interest that have been relatively unknown to the American public.<sup>61</sup> The director and co-producer is Lawrence Hott who has spearheaded other prominent films for Public Television including *Niagara Falls* which premiered in July, 2006 and the 1997 film *Divided Highways*, which was also co-produced by WETA Washington.

Kenton and Hott brought on Ken Chowder early in the production process (late 2002-early 2003) in order to write a funding proposal for a CPB/PBS Challenge Grant. *Through Deaf Eyes* received funding through the CPB/PBS Challenge fund, a fund set up to administer funding for primetime programming to be aired throughout the PBS system based on mutually determined goals.<sup>62</sup> The *Through Deaf Eyes* project also received funding through the National Endowment of the Humanities. The film is a two-hour documentary that explores the history of the deaf community in the United States over the past 200 years. It aired during primetime on PBS stations nationwide on March 21, 2007.<sup>63</sup>

Per the National Endowment of the Humanities application and award letter, the purpose of the film was to be the exploration of:

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<sup>61</sup> The history of the production of the film *Through Deaf Eyes* was provided by Karen Kenton in a personal interview on March 19, 2008, Ken Chowder in a personal interview on March 26, 2008, and Lawrence Hott in a personal interview on February 18, 2008.

<sup>62</sup> Corporation for Public Broadcasting, "CPB: Program Challenge Fund," *Corporation for Public Broadcasting Grants*, <http://www.cpb.org/grants/07challengefund/> (accessed 7 April 2008).

<sup>63</sup> Florentine Films/Hott Productions, "Through Deaf Eyes," *Hott Productions: The Films*, 2007, <http://www.florentinefilms.org/thefilms/00film.htm> (accessed 25 January 2008).

*200 years of American history: the experience of the deaf community in the United States from 1814 to the present. The program will show how the broad sweep of U.S. history intersected the experiences of deaf people, revealing the way that social, economic, medical, and technological shifts in America have changed deaf lives.*<sup>64</sup>

The NEH proposal provides an overview of the film subdividing the history from “significance to the humanities” which allows the film to be both a historical documentary, but also provides allowance for commentary on contemporary issues within the deaf community including the role of technology in today’s deaf world and the role of ASL in the curriculum of modern deaf education. In addition, the film itself was intended to be extremely accessible to the deaf community and respect the uniqueness and beauty of the deaf language, ASL. According to the proposal

*Every word will be subtitled or signed; at the same time, signed words will be recorded as voice-over. There will be an unmistakably active sense to the words in the film, because they will be images as well.*

In the context of other televisual and film productions, *Through Deaf Eyes* was always intended to be unique, as “the first comprehensive, humanities-based program to be produced on the story of the deaf community in American society.”<sup>65</sup>

WETA and Hott Productions provided assurance in the National Endowment for the Humanities funding proposal that they would create a unique presentation of the history of the deaf in America, but this assurance was not the only mandate attached to the production of the film. In addition, the producers sought further funding through a

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<sup>64</sup> WETA Washington, DC. Proposal for National Endowment for the Humanities Grant for the Production of *Through Deaf Eyes*. Award granted July 22, 2004. Provided by Jim Corbley, Project Manager, WETA on December 4, 2007.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

CPB/PBS Challenge Fund Grant.<sup>66</sup> As part of the process of applying for this grant, the producers were required to formally present the project to CPB, whose major concern was the ability for the project to remain ‘balanced’ in its breadth of topics and the perspectives presented in each topic presented. The mandate of a degree of ‘balance’ is one that continued to be present throughout all aspects of the production process. The mandates and assurances provided by the filmmakers and their funders remain a major part of how the film was constructed and the ways that the cultural group presented was expressed.

‘Balance’, the overarching mandate by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in their funding of the *Through Deaf Eyes* project, is the same concern that was raised in the early stages of the exhibition. According to the producers, the balance presented in the film makes it distinctive among representations of the deaf experience, though what is meant by the term remains entirely subjective. In a personal interview, Ken Chowder spoke of the complexity of creating a story where there was necessity to maintain a balance of perspectives.<sup>67</sup> He implies that in order to reconcile this difficulty, that ‘balance’ can be seen as dialogic with one ‘side’ of a controversial topic speaking to the other. In this way, the underrepresented deaf culture perspective can fulfill a majority of a representation because it ‘speaks to’ the public opinion provided by perception of deafness as a disability. This type of balance provides the opportunity for audiences to obtain new information that they can put in dialog with the information they have received from earlier presentations on the topic, effectively ‘evening the score’.

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<sup>66</sup> History of the funding for the film *Through Deaf Eyes* was provided by Karen Kenton in a personal interview on March 19, 2006.

<sup>67</sup> Chowder, Ken. Interview by author, notes, San Francisco, CA (by phone), 26 March 2008.

Other perceptions of ‘balance’ are more concrete and typically are presented in the film where the ‘two sides’ are fundamentally at odds with each other. In these cases, balance occurs as both sides are presented objectively, without judgment being ascribed, and as completely and informatively as possible. The example provided from the letter writing campaign that calls for the exhibition to present perspectives of oral and manual traditions equally falls within the scope of this definition. The purpose of ‘balance’ in situations where two points-of-view within the deaf community are completely in opposition with each other is not to change the audience’s mind about the topic, but provide a base of knowledge to allow them to formulate their own opinions.

From all that can be ascertained by the evidence provided in interviews and documentation of the project, CPB’s official mandate of a balanced presentation of deaf life was never officially defined. Throughout the project ‘balance’ was evaluated in individual cases and through a collaborative process between the members of the production team and particularly with a group of advisors who maintained a good deal of influence over the content of the film. These advisors and experts are deaf or are in other ways actively involved in the deaf community. Their expertise is largely supplied by their own personal experiences with deaf culture and history, though many have devoted their lives to scholarship of ‘the deaf’ as a subject. Most of these individuals have some relationship with Gallaudet University as former students, professors, or administrators. The association with Gallaudet University began early with the initial contact between WETA and Jean Bergey and remains a particularly significant feature of the film. Gallaudet is the first University for the deaf in the United States and remains a top school

for secondary education for deaf students.<sup>68</sup> The ties to this prestigious university and the collaboration by Hott Productions with a variety of subjects and advisors at the university provides immediate credibility to the film in terms of offering true representations of the deaf community, issues that are most immediate in the community, and illumination into the struggles that this culture faces in society at large. The film makes significant use of these contacts through insight into the community, interviews with these advisory ‘experts’ and access to the historical sources that were acquired for the exhibit.

*Through Deaf Eyes* contains a variety of viewpoints from both the deaf and hearing worlds, which through extensive collaboration provide a text that is committed to ‘balance’ in presentation of deaf topics. The history of films inception brings to light the ways that this textual representation is unique; its well established and respected production team, association with a prominent deaf educational institution and deaf scholars, and maintenance of ‘balance’ as an overarching theme to obtain funding and public accountability. In these ways, *Through Deaf Eyes* presents a fresh view of deaf culture and history and can be utilized as a stable case study for understanding the nuances that occur in construction of cultural representations.

The documentary *Sound and Fury* presents a stark contrast to *Through Deaf Eyes*. This film was produced by Aronson Film Associations, directed by Josh Aronson and presented by Artistic License Films. It was distributed to public television stations by WNET/Thirteen New York and aired nationwide in 2000. As a documentary that is associated with public television, *Sound and Fury* maintains the necessity of providing an

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<sup>68</sup> Gallaudet University, “Gallaudet History,” *Gallaudet History - Gallaudet University*, 2007, <http://www.gallaudet.edu/x228.xml> (accessed 25 January 2008).

informative representation of deaf experience, though as an independent documentary, it is not required to present the same balance in perspective as in *Through Deaf Eyes*.

The film follows two branches of the Artinian family as they debate whether to provide cochlear implants to their children, a medical intervention that seeks to restore hearing by implanting a device that bypasses the faulty natural mechanisms of the ear. This process is quite controversial. Cochlear implants have been a part of deaf life for over two decades and their technology is improving, but the process is still invasive and the results are not predictable. Many deaf people do not benefit from having a cochlear implant; their hearing remains ineffective and they must still rely on sign language for communication. For others, particularly those who lost their hearing later in life, the implant provides a substantial improvement in hearing. For these individuals speech can be learned effectively and total integration into hearing society is possible. The decision to get an implant for oneself or child involves these medical and a variety of social considerations which can lead to continued conflict in families and within communities.

Peter Artinian and his wife Nita are both deaf and speak exclusively in American Sign Language. They have a five year old daughter, Heather, who is also deaf, but has expressed to her parents that she would like a cochlear implant so that she can hear sounds. Peter's parents, Marianne and Peter, are fully hearing and are supportive of Heather's desire to get an implant. Peter's brother Chris and his wife Mari are hearing, though both sign and are very familiar with the deaf world. They have newborn twins, one of whom was born deaf. Chris and Mari are exploring getting a cochlear implant for their child, Peter, as an infant in order to maximize the benefits of the surgery. Mari's parents, Nancy and Michael Mancini are both deaf. They are against the surgery, afraid

that the child will grow up without knowing his deaf heritage and will be considered a 'robot' by the deaf community.

*Sound and Fury* presents deaf culture in a way that is quite different from *Through Deaf Eyes*. In this film, the deafness is presented largely as a disability that prevents people from achieving in normal society. Deaf culture is realistically portrayed as a source of contention between the deaf and the hearing. The deaf are presented largely as irrational and isolationist. The cultural community is shown as blocking the true potential of the deaf because they prevent oral education and mainstreaming. This film does not contain nor does it attempt to provide the balance in representation that is required in *Through Deaf Eyes*. The representation of deafness as a disability and the discounting of deaf culture mainly serve to propagate pre-existing public opinion.

The film was a critical success in terms of its place within a body of documentary work. *Sound and Fury* won awards including the 2001 Oscar nomination for best documentary. David Sterritt of the Christian Science Monitor was one of many who gave the film a perfect critical score. He wrote, "[r]arely does a movie combine so much genuine human drama with such vivid exemplifications of "identity politics" and other sociocultural issues."<sup>69</sup> Despite the 'critical acclaim' the film was not successful within the deaf community. In the deaf world, especially the ASL community, this film was an outrage because of the way that the deaf are presented. The overall tone of the film and the observational cuts make the deaf community out to be impassioned rather than of reason; the 'voice of reason' coming from the hearing parts of the Artinian family and medical professionals who have a stake in providing access to hearing for the children.

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<sup>69</sup> "Sound and Fury (2000): Reviews," *Metacritic.com* / *Sound and Fury*, <http://www.metacritic.com/film/titles/soundandfury/> (accessed 7 April 2008).

This documentary followed certain filmmaking techniques that affected the presentation of the minority culture. According to the production team for *Through Deaf Eyes* who followed in the footsteps of *Sound and Fury*, much of the documentary was staged or set-up to follow a particular agenda. When Karen Kenton and Lawrence Hott approached James Tucker, the Superintendent at the Maryland School for the Deaf, he was hesitant to allow the team to film because of his experience of being represented in *Sound and Fury*. According to Kenton, Tucker stated that the *Sound and Fury* team was obtrusive and staged much of the shooting within his school. As a contrast, when he allowed the *Through Deaf Eyes* team into the school, they acted as ‘a fly on the wall’ and strictly observed by aid of the camera in order to see the actual scope of the educational experience at his institution.<sup>70</sup> The *Sound and Fury* team’s strict agenda in the creation of the documentary presents a pointed view of deaf culture that skews towards the main perceptions of the hearing world. This filmmaking technique paired with the status of the film as an independent production presents a lack of oversight into whether the film fairly portrays the deaf community.

This chapter explores *Through Deaf Eyes* in comparison to *Sound and Fury*. The following sections explore the films in terms of their visual components and the filmmaking techniques that provide the greatest impact on representation. This analysis will help establish the ideological topics within the deaf community that are most often presented in these texts; topics that clarify the degree of consideration and ‘balance’ that the filmmakers exercised in their productions.

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<sup>70</sup> Kenton, Karen. Interview by Author, notes, Arlington, VA, 19 March 2008.

## VISUAL REPRESENTATION AND THE DEAF

Visuality is vital to the deaf world. According to Ben Bahan, prominent deaf scholar and professor of ASL and Deaf Studies and Gallaudet, the state-of-mind of the deaf is that of a visual person rather than a person who cannot hear. In his article “Notes from a ‘Seeing Person’”, he describes the common interaction between himself and the hearing world where he feels it is more complicated to communicate to a hearing person that he cannot hear, rather than to describe to them that he *can* see. He believes that this assertion would provide a hearing person greater latitude in communicating with the deaf including using gesture or writing rather than the general tendency to get flustered or in Bahan’s term, “freeze”. In this article he calls for a redefinition in identity; for deaf individuals to refer to themselves as visual, as ‘seeing people’.<sup>71</sup> The mindset that Bahan describes provides proof that the visuality is indeed central to the deaf experience.

This section examines the prominent role of the visual as a key component to deaf culture and uses this as a means of ascribing importance to the visual aspects of cultural representation in televisual texts. It will use visual representations in television to determine the relevance of the visual to deaf culture and will seek out visual cues and methodology for reading visual texts in order to determine cultural meaning in the film. This section will look to deaf culture and the importance of visuality to determine the effectiveness of visual elements of the film.

## VISUAL CULTURE IN THE DEAF WORLD: EYE-TH AND EAR-TH

Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, in their recent book *Inside Deaf Culture*, describe the visual nature of deaf culture through the words of George Veditz who

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<sup>71</sup> Ben Bahan, “Notes from a ‘Seeing Person’,” in *American Deaf Culture: An Anthology*. (Burtonsville, Maryland: Linstok Press, 1989), 29-32.

believed that the deaf are “first, last, and for all time, the people of the eye.”<sup>72</sup> Padden and Humphries elaborate on the concept by asserting that deaf people are indeed visual and that their lives revolve in some ways around seeing. In addition, their “ways of seeing” are somewhat constructed by their history and cultural practices.<sup>73</sup> The stigma associated with the visual American Sign Language and other practices that are closely tied to how the deaf are educated, receive news and information, and otherwise live their lives contribute to and result from the dominance of the visual in deaf culture.

One way that individuals within the deaf community present the visuality of their culture is by comparing it to the fiercely auditory nature of the hearing culture. Commonly, this is described in a common set of terms that have been adopted in deaf culture: EARth vs. EYEth. In the film *Through Deaf Eyes* interviewee Mark Morales, a performance artist, describes the deaf experiences in these terms:

*We have this planet which we call earth. We spell it E-A-R-T-H so it relates to the ear, to speaking and hearing. There's this other planet E-Y-E-T-H. And that relates to the eye and the visual. So there are two worlds. I grew up on Earth. Now, I'm on this other planet, E-Y-E-T-H a world where all these possibilities are open to me.*<sup>74</sup>

For Morales and other deaf individuals the complications of living in a hearing world are difficult to overcome, but by creating close associations with the deaf world, they are able to focus and succeed. The importance of this example is that the term given to this deaf world, EYEth, is related to the visual or what can be seen and experienced through the eye rather than through hearing. In taking ownership of the visual world, either through creation of an imaginary space, EYEth, or through identity as a ‘seeing person’ rather

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<sup>72</sup> Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Inside Deaf Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Lawrence Hott, *Through Deaf Eyes* (WETA Washington D.C., 2007).

than a person who cannot hear, the deaf find power in their identity and in what they are able to achieve rather than what the hearing world claims that they lack.

Not only does *Through Deaf Eyes* explore the visual world through interviews with Morales and others, but also they assert the importance of the visual to the deaf community in other ways. One focus of the film is the way that cinematic history impacted deaf culture. According to the film, the visual nature of silent films was well suited to deaf audiences and the later inclusion of sound was a major blow to the inclusion of the deaf in this major aspect of American popular culture. Deaf filmmaker Arthur Luhn, whose short film “Destination Eyeth” was included in *Through Deaf Eyes* explores the legend of the planet Eyeth with major reference to the fruitfulness of the silent film era to the deaf community. This film was created to look like an antique silent film with its requisite visual flaws and the frantic gesturing that was typical of this era. With this loaded historical referent, the subjects of the film seek unique ways to try to leave planet Earth and explore the planet Eyeth. The inclusion of this short film, so focused on the visuality of deaf culture, shows the commitment by the producers of *Through Deaf Eyes* to the exploration of the visual nature of the deaf experience.

#### VISUAL LANGUAGE TECHNIQUES

There are a variety of techniques utilized by the producers of *Through Deaf Eyes* in order to communicate between the linguistic cultures of the deaf and the hearing. The National Endowment for the Humanities funding proposal stipulates that the film is to maintain a variety of linguistic techniques in order to ensure that all audiences, deaf and hearing, will be able to understand and appreciate both the spoken and signed commentary within the film. The original feed of the film that aired on PBS stations

nationwide utilized a variety of subtitles and closed-captions in order to communicate spoken English as well as voiced translation into English of visual American Sign Language presentations. A few promotional DVD copies of the film on DVD were supplied with open captions for pre-release screenings. This film is unique with regard to these varied methods of communication.

In the production of the film, the issue of translation became a major concern. In each interview Producer Lawrence Hott directly interviewed the subjects. Lawrence, a hearing person required the assistance of an interpreter to adequately interview the subjects on camera. He later described the process of this interpretation explaining that the production staff used a device called a 'sylencer'. This innovation, originally created for court stenographers, ensured that the sound recorded by the microphones on signing interviewees would be usable for the final cut of the film, while the verbal translation by the interpreter would not be heard on the soundtrack. Executive Producer Karen Kenton explained that despite this extra step, it was vital to have Hott undertake the interviews personally, as his ability as an interviewer was a major reason for the success of the film. Understanding this, many members of the production staff found the process imprecise as the combination of deaf and hearing individuals co-mingling in the interview space and the constant translation between ASL and spoken English created a sense of confusion.

The producers of the film *Sound and Fury* were not as concerned with both deaf and hearing audiences as the producers of *Through Deaf Eyes*. In this earlier documentary, in some instances where deaf individuals are speaking, their words are translated into English via voiceover rather than captions. In other parts of the film, when a third party is translating spoken English into sign, the focus is on the speaker, not

the signer, so deaf audiences are unable to understand the dialog. One example of this is a scene that where the deaf mother, Nita Artinian, is interacting with a specialist at the Lennox Hill Hospital Cochlear Implant Center where she was screened for candidacy for a Cochlear Implant. In this scene, the specialist and Nita are discussing how well she will hear with the Implant. The camera focuses on Nita as she signs, but when the specialist is speaking, the only focus is on the specialist speaking or on Nita's reaction, *not* on the signing which only enters the picture in the foreground as a stylistic element.

Occasionally during this scene, the camera does not even focus on Nita's signing, but rather relies solely on the voiceover to disclose the communication. In the expository representations where the individual members of the family are speaking directly to the camera, the focus is much more clearly on the signing, which is also translated in voiceover.

The feature film *Children of a Lesser God* exhibits many of the visual language failures that are presented in *Sound and Fury*. This film does not use any narration or titling in order to translate the sign language expressed by 'Sarah' or any of the other deaf characters in the film. Instead, when the speech is necessary to moving the story along, it is made clear by one of the hearing characters, most often 'James'. Prominent historian John Schuchman discusses this technique as a failure due to the poor editing and lighting choices that make it difficult for deaf viewers to see the signing clearly or completely.<sup>75</sup> In *Children of a Lesser God*, there are no titles and as a feature film being played in a movie theatre, captions are not provided as a standard. Deaf audiences going to the theatre to see this film first hand were still left in the dark without access to the dialog

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<sup>75</sup> John Schuchman (1988), 85.

presented by hearing characters and without full knowledge of what was signed by Matlin and other deaf characters due to failures by the production team to ensure that the deaf viewer was kept top of mind.

The choices in visual language interpretation that were made in these films express the commitment to providing access to different segments of the population, particularly to both deaf and hearing audiences. The production team of *Through Deaf Eyes* expresses this commitment in both intent and practice while the producers of *Sound and Fury* and *Children of a Lesser God* fail to consider deaf audiences who would wish to experience films about their own people in their own language. Without adequate access to the signed elements of the films, deaf audiences must rely on other visual representations of language, particularly captioning. Additionally, hearing audiences must rely on translation or captioning to understand any signed communication. These two devices help provide access to both deaf and hearing audiences.

#### TRANSLATION AND CAPTIONING

The medium of television has a strong relationship with the deaf community for a variety of reasons. Early on in broadcast television, portrayals of the deaf shadowed film, with the ‘dummy’ character acting as the preeminent liaison between the deaf and hearing worlds. Beginning in the 1970s, deaf culture began to find a voice with regards to television, beginning with the campaign for Closed Captioning moving beyond regulations by the FCC with regards to captioning emergency information on stations, and allowing for broader use of captions on news and entertainment programming.<sup>76</sup> Aside from being an important source of news, entertainment, and information for a

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<sup>76</sup> Schuchman, John S. *Hollywood Speaks: Deafness and the Film Entertainment Industry*. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 91.

community who can best communicate visually; this medium also provides a very important role as the communicator of the subject of deafness to the hearing world.

One major consideration that must be explored regarding a film that presents deaf culture to a public broadcasting audience, is to what extent the producers of the film made the film accessible to both their target hearing audiences as well as to the deaf audiences that they are portraying. In order to ensure that appropriate representation of a minority culture occurs within the film, the technical nature of the film must allow that cultural group to access the film and participate in the discourse surrounding the film. For the deaf community, one major component of this means translation of spoken English into either sign language or written English, which will accompany the translation of ASL into spoken or written English that allows accessibility for the targeted hearing audiences, the majority of whom are not prolific signers.

Translation has long been an issue in the filmmaking process of cross-cultural documentary and ethnographic films. For this reason, it is given prominence in Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor's filmmaking handbook, *Cross-Cultural Filmmaking: A handbook for making documentary and ethnographic films and videos*. The authors, both ethnographic filmmakers, think of translation in documentary film on many levels. Primarily, translation occurs in every anthropological encounter, as the goal of the anthropologist is to "render aspects of one culture intelligible to another."<sup>77</sup> The second level of translation occurs on the level of the medium, where cultural structures and concepts have to not only been made understandable to a group of people, but also it

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<sup>77</sup> Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor, *Cross-Cultural Filmmaking: A Handbook for Making Documentary and Ethnographic Films and Videos* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 420.

must be expressed or translated, to the discourse of film. Finally, translation occurs on the linguistic level where a language that is unfamiliar to the audience of the film is reinterpreted into a language and concepts that they will understand.

*Through Deaf Eyes* clearly encompasses translation on all of these levels. It strives to translate the life experiences of deaf culture into concepts that are more easily understood by the hearing world. The producers of the film also translate this cultural material, some of which was expressed textually in publications to film. One technique the producers of *Through Deaf Eyes* utilized to achieve this goal was to add dimensions that the textual experience cannot capture; the beauty and fluidity of seeing these anecdotes told in ‘the original’ sign language rather than translated into written English. For example, an anecdote expressed by Sam Supalla regarding his first experience with the knowledge that he was part of a minority group that did not communicate using his mouth was first written in Carol Padden and Tom Humphries’ 1988 book *Deaf in America: Voices from a culture*. In *Through Deaf Eyes*, this same anecdote was expressed first hand by Sam Supalla in expository form where he is seated speaking ‘directly’ to the audience and using the art of deaf storytelling to recount the tale through American Sign Language. The difference between the two translations, one into written text and the other onto film, is apparent; the effect of the visual representation of the story is both moving and informative.

The visual techniques and usages outlined in this section are clear reflections of the importance of sight in the deaf world, from the fight for captioning which allows inclusion of the deaf into mainstream hearing popular culture of television and film to the creation of an imaginary space for deaf culture alone that provides an exclusive outlet for

deaf existence and creativity. These visual devices provide an outlet for the producers of *Through Deaf Eyes* and other television and film productions to delve into the deaf experience through the use of common documentary techniques. *Through Deaf Eyes* and *Sound and Fury* both provide aural materials that also express the uniqueness of deaf experience, including use of powerful auditory language and expression that comes through in observational and interviewed footage, the allowance of the expression of natural deaf sound that accompanies signed language, and inclusion of music. While aural input provides additional opportunity for analysis, it is more valuable to note how the visual becomes ingrained in the films through the application of ethnographic documentary techniques that can be used to explain some of the more vital and controversial aspects of the cultural representation that are presented.

#### **DOCUMENTARY AND STRUCTURAL TECHNIQUES**

*Through Deaf Eyes* is a standard documentary with cultural subject matter. It contains features that are expository and observational as well as features that can be considered unique in the context of standard documentary film. This section will look at different techniques that highlight the varied ways that deaf experience is represented in the film. The primary ways that deaf culture is depicted are through interviews and anecdotes, historical presentation, observational filming, and the inclusion of what could be considered 'indigenous' films, films produced by deaf filmmakers that both contribute to the overall story of the documentary, but provide unique access into the personal side of deaf experience. Each part of this section will explore a structural technique used by the producers of *Through Deaf Eyes* and will explore how the techniques lend to the representations of deaf people and deaf culture.

## EXPOSITORY TECHNIQUES

According to Barbash and Taylor, expository documentary films speak directly to the spectator through an address by an on-screen commentator or a voiceover track. These authors suggest that this type of documentary technique comments on the scene or topic instead of participating in it.<sup>78</sup> In other words, each expository moment in the documentary stands as a discourse on the topic of the documentary or a hermeneutic instead of solely presenting a topic or observation. In *Through Deaf Eyes*, the ways this technique is implemented influences how the deaf are represented because these expository moments not only present elements of deaf culture or history, but they comment on them and present a subjective position within the discourse. If any, these are places within the film where the intent or construction of the producers will come through over any attempt for transparent view of the reality of experience.

The major way that expository documentary is explored in *Through Deaf Eyes* is through the telling of anecdotes or the presentation of interview-type performance by well known deaf celebrities, activists, leaders, and academics or those who participate in deaf culture through studying its history. The majority of these presentations occur in a 'stage' type of setting where the figure is seated in front of a draped curtain and is placed so that they abide by the compositional rule of thirds; slightly on the left or right hand side of the screen and facing directly at the audience speaking or signing directly to the camera. Each of the interviewees or storytellers holds a certain cache within the fields of deaf history and deaf culture studies, or in some other way speaks as an expert in the experience of being deaf.

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<sup>78</sup> Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor, *Cross-Cultural Filmmaking: A Handbook for Making Documentary and Ethnographic Films and Videos* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 17.

The producers of the film have chosen the individuals who would be the most capable to speak for the deaf community; those whose commentary would be the most respected by other deaf people. Some of these individuals include actors Marlee Matlin, CJ Jones, and Bernard Bragg, historians Douglas Baynton and John Vickrey Van Cleve, academic Carol Padden, author Tom Humphries, and former Gallaudet President I. King Jordan. These expositors bring credibility to the film, but they also bring personality and experience, and humanistic quality to the topic. The telling of experiential anecdotes by these personalities provides not just commentary on a historical or cultural situation, but also puts a face on the struggles and camaraderie that are explored by the historical content of *Through Deaf Eyes*. As an example, as the producers are documenting the history behind the ‘name signs’ we are provided with a story told by Gallaudet Professor Carolyn McCaskill about how she received her own name sign. Through her signing, she uses humor to describe how her fellow students and friends named her with a sign that shadows the way she moves her hips when she walks. By presenting a human example of the residential school experience, the producers are able to provide not only a view into the deaf world, but also a comment on it; the comment being that the experience was personal to those that lived through it, which included the fun and companionship, but also included segregation and hardship.

This technique is also used in the documentary film *Sound and Fury*. There are quite a few observational moments within the film that are later commented on through expository explanation by the characters. Within the film, there are many moments of conflict within the family that are observed by the cameras. Interspersed within these scenes are shots of Peter or Nita Artinian, seated and directly addressing the audience,

commenting on the conflict and providing perspective on the story that is unfolding. This approach allows the film to be pointed toward a position, or to comment on many positions in order to place the observational scenes within a discourse upon the topic.

The other expository technique used within the film *Through Deaf Eyes* is the use of voiceover. This technique is used exclusively to describe the historical moments of importance within the deaf community. Actress Stockard Channing exclusively provides the voice over to the film, so her voice becomes a marker for a specific type of presented knowledge: historical depth. In each of these segments, the producers have provided photographs, early films, and news footage as a way of visual explaining the deaf experience, language, or other cultural features. Again, with this expository technique, the film does not just present the topic of deaf history, but by using the voice over narration, it places this history within a discourse, explaining its importance within the deaf community and providing additional enlightenment on controversial subjects including educational methods and use of new technologies to enhance hearing.

These expository techniques function to add additional depth to the content provided in other aspects of the film, including the observational moments. As stated earlier, one purpose of exposition in documentary is place the topic in context or discourse. By doing so, the producers seem to be taking a stance on the ways that they choose to represent deaf individuals and deaf culture. They are not standing by to allow the audience to create their own opinions of deaf culture, but they are actively choosing the way that they are representing the deaf world by selecting particular individuals to speak for the community and by selecting certain commentary to be narrative over historical images and footage. Exposition could be seen as working against the goals of a

transparent portrayal of deaf culture because it inserts the voices of the producers and further constructs the representation. In *Sound and Fury* the pointing of the audience towards a particular perspective through exposition becomes a violation of accuracy. In *Through Deaf Eyes*, although transparency is discarded, the producers are cautious about the exposition that is presented and the construction of the text serves to create a balance that may not be achievable by use of other techniques.

#### OBSERVATIONAL TECHNIQUES

Observation is a documentary filmmaking technique that is more difficult to manipulate into a pointed representation. The major distinction of observational techniques in documentary filmmaking is the presentation of “everyday life” cultural activities through observational styles of filming, filming where the camera is unobtrusive and just acts as another set of eyes that are exploring the scene. This technique reduces the need for producers to create illusion surrounding the constructed nature of depictions because observational filming is seen by audiences as a first-person view into another world.

*Sound and Fury* looks at the controversy over cochlear implants mainly through observation of a family who is going through the decision-making process. This film literally watches the Artinian family over a period of time. The majority of the story is simple observation of the family and their meetings with various educational professionals, medical professionals, and other families who have gone through similar decisions. The only other techniques used in the film are short expositional features that explain conflicts or conversations that require additional commentary.

This is not the case with *Through Deaf Eyes*. In this documentary the majority of the film is expository since it seeks to tell a history rather than to show the emotional story of a family. Despite this, there are a few small segments of observation in the film that are interspersed with additional explanation. For the most part, this footage is used only in places where words cannot adequately describe an experience. For instance, one scene shows the band “Beethoven’s Nightmare” as they perform music to a deaf crowd that dances and sings through signs. Going to see a band play is an experience that hearing people may take advantage of, but most hearing people believe that deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals cannot enjoy music, singing, and dancing in the same ways as hearing people. By showing the audience this experience, it provides hearing viewers with the knowledge that this type of event does occur within the deaf community and that the deaf can appreciate live musical performance. Since the technique being used is observational rather than expository, the audience is presented with raw information to make their own decisions about the scene rather than an anecdote that leads them towards a particular position within the discourse.

Another instance of observational documentation within *Through Deaf Eyes* is the presentation of footage of two major occasions at the Clarke School for the Deaf in Northampton, Massachusetts. Much of this footage is used as a ‘visual filler’ that expands on something that is being presented aurally, it is only intended as a glimpse of the reality of deaf experience at an oral school both as a youth who is going through the normative act of graduating and interacting with friends and family, but also later in life at a reunion presenting the experience of returning to one’s alma mater and reconnecting with old friends. In this footage there is no exposition to provide a position on what is

occurring on-screen, though without explanation, audiences are able to see aspects of the footage that may have been overlooked in aural clutter. The camera captures oral deaf people, who are often discouraged from gesturing during their education, communicating with each other in sign language. This code-switching is a reality of oral deaf experience where the lines between oral and manual deaf communities breaks down, but the transparency provided by the inclusion of this observational filming caused a good deal of criticism within the deaf world because it showed the blurring of boundaries that are seen as fixed and showed an experience that many manual deaf people do not like to acknowledge.

The point of observational techniques in these documentaries is to allow the audience to be impartial observers of the cultural instance or experience. There are few instances in *Through Deaf Eyes* where this technique is utilized, but the places that do allow strict observation of the deaf world by the audience provide a unique perspective into this complex community. It is telling that *Through Deaf Eyes* places less importance on these observational moments than on the exposition of historical commentary or personal revelation. The producers of the film use observational techniques sparingly and as such are choosing to create a more intentional response to the representations that they are putting forward.

#### SELF-REPRESENTATIONAL FILMS

Exposition and observation are ways that producers can present the ‘illusion’ of reality of deaf experience, but with these techniques there is the risk that viewers may assume that because they are presented with first-person information, that this is indeed a form of representation that comes directly from the deaf community. In reality, the

production team selects each of these individuals included in the film and they are speaking on topics that are prompted by these decision-makers. Additionally, the editing process ensures that the full context of the first-person commentary remains incomplete. The producers of *Through Deaf Eyes* create a provision to combat the distrust that can come about in the relationship between audience and producer by allowing for what can be seen as more direct communication between the audience and the deaf themselves. This unique feature that is carefully inserted into the content of *Through Deaf Eyes* can be seen in short films of self-representation or first person narrative created by deaf filmmakers to present a deaf perspective within the film.

The documentary contains six shorts, each by a different filmmaker. Each segment touches on an aspect of deaf life that the filmmaker found personally relevant. The films and a brief summary of their significance are seen in Figure 1 below. These films not only provide a glimpse into what might be considered a ‘deaf experience’, but they also provide insight into the individual experiences each filmmaker is faced with. These short films show that while there is a common thread that runs through identity in the deaf world, each deaf person is an individual with their own perspectives and backgrounds. The films provide ‘proof’ to a mainly hearing audience that deaf individuals should not be discriminated against, that just like any hearing filmmaker, they are capable of creating beautiful and meaningful presentations in film.

<b>FILM</b>	<b>DEAF FILMMAKER</b>	<b>TOPIC</b>
<i>Vital Signs</i>	Wayne Betts, Jr.	ASL storytelling and aesthetics, issues confronted by deaf populations
<i>Listen</i>	Kimby Caplan	The experience of sound and sound technology for the deaf, explanation of audiogram
<i>Destination Eyeth</i>	Arthur Luhn	The separation between the hearing and deaf worlds, the visual nature of deafness
<i>Equilibrium</i>	Andreas Mangiardi	The technology of Cochlear Implants, the experience of using cochlear implants
<i>That's My Marshmallow</i>	Tracey Salaway	Choices in the deaf world and personal agency
<i>Audism</i>	Rene Visco	Discrimination against deaf people, experience of living as part of the deaf minority in the hearing world

FIGURE 1: SELF-REPRESENTATIVE FILMS IN *THROUGH DEAF EYES*

Like the expositional techniques, these films are slightly misleading in the way that they provide a seemingly unbiased portrayal of deaf culture since each film was selected for inclusion and presented within the context of the rest of the cultural knowledge. Some submissions to the project were not selected as they did not fit within the story that was being presented by the *Through Deaf Eyes* production team or they did not present a production quality that was deemed admissible. Even among the films that were included, many were edited for time and content. Although these films were also at the whim of the production team, selected for inclusion in the film, they present an opportunity to add to the discourse on the tradition of indigenous filmmaking that was explored in the previous chapter. Although these shorts are a part of the constructed nature of *Through Deaf Eyes*, as ‘indigenous filmmakers’ the individuals have the agency

to present their view of their culture to broad audiences only strengthening the assertion that deaf filmmakers can present their own experiences and conditions.

### **CONCLUSION: IDEOLOGY AND CONTROVERSY**

This chapter has explored how *Through Deaf Eyes* and other televisual texts present the information and knowledge of the deaf experience. The reality of (and reliance on) visuality as a means of receiving and presenting information about deaf experience is central to the deaf community. These texts tell their stories through a variety of techniques. Additionally, there are different degrees of commitment to balance and transparency in representation, but each text provides an interesting perspective from which to determine how, in technical terms, deaf culture is presented to mainstream audiences.

The producers place importance upon more than the technical means they utilize to create televisual representations. The politics, ideologies, and controversies of the deaf world are present in many of the texts that exist that depict this minority group. Exploration of the major conflicts that divide the deaf community and the ways that *Through Deaf Eyes* and other filmic texts present these issues, is vital to realize the consequences of cultural representation in mass media formats.

## CREATING CULTURAL REPRESENTATION IN *THROUGH DEAF EYES*

### INTRODUCTION

The production of a documentary film, particularly a film created for distribution on public television stations, is a collaborative process that incorporates the input and expertise of a variety of groups of specialists in production, the academy, and other institutions that are involved in the process of creating a successful television broadcast. The result of this collaboration is that a broad spectrum, a continuum of cultural experience, is reduced to a singular representation. Through its broadcast on a trusted medium this condensed portrayal of a minority group can be taken by audiences as a truthful presentation, rather than the reduction of a variety of viewpoints. The specifics of a representation are determined through decision-making among the various parties involved about how particular aspects of the culture are to be presented as a cohesive truth.

Within deaf culture, there are a many controversial topics that divide the community. This chapter will focus on three seminal debates within the deaf community and explore how they are presented in the film *Through Deaf Eyes*. The degree to which the producers ‘reflectively’ depict deaf experience will be illuminated by the balance of perspectives that are provided in the film on these three broad topics. In order to understand the intentions of the team, and the process of decision-making, the following sections look at commentary provided by the production team on how and why these issues were presented as they were in the final broadcast. It will examine each subject in terms of the decision-making process, discourse between the individuals and institutions who hold residence on the production team, and the viewpoints that were considered in

the creation of a final representation that was provided in the broadcast version of the film.

Each section will focus on a ‘hot-button topic’ that is the subject of discourse within the deaf community: oral vs. manual methods of education and communication, deafness as a cultural community vs. deafness as a disability, and the use of technology for communication vs. use of technology as a ‘cure’ for deafness. These topics are inherently interrelated, though each individual section breaks down the issue into a specific debate on the means and methods of representation of the topic. The controversy of each issue is highlighted and a brief synopsis is provided that explores how it is represented within the film. These details are then placed in the context of ‘how it got that way’ from the perspectives of the producers. Placing the voices of the producers in dialog with the texts they have created allows a greater understanding of their influences upon representation of the culture and contextualizes their own position on the controversies. Understanding the depth of decision-making within the production process creates a fully constructed and singular representation of a cultural minority.

Balance, as a concept, means different things to different individuals. With a mandate to present a balanced view of deaf culture, the production team of *Through Deaf Eyes* was also required to come to terms and compromise on their own perceptions of what this word means. Executive Producers from WETA were required to hold fast to institutional meanings of balance that focus solely on the transmission of “accurate and impartial information.”<sup>79</sup> Other members of the production team had different insights

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<sup>79</sup> Public Broadcasting Service, “The PBS Mission: Producing for PBS,” *Producing for PBS: A How To Manual for Producers*, 2005, <http://www.pbs.org/producers/mission.html> (accessed 22 April 2008).

on what ‘balance’ means. According to scriptwriter Ken Chowder, his goal as the writer and storyteller was to create a good story; a work that has a logical sequence and that can hold the interest of the audience. Because of this, balance was not always the focus of his writing. During production, situations arose where his writing and ideas were altered because other producers were concerned that the script was not balanced enough. The production team collaborated extensively to ensure that the appropriate level of balance was achieved; achieved through a variety of techniques including presentation of ‘two sides of the story’ or a dialog between the film, the standard portrayal in popular culture and the resulting public opinion. In each of the following sections, these distinctions are explored in conjunction to the ways that the film *Through Deaf Eyes* explains controversial issues within the deaf world.

### **WHAT IS DEAFNESS: A DISABILITY OR A CULTURAL COMMUNITY?**

Deafness as a concept itself is controversial within and outside of the deaf community. For those who consider deafness as a pathological condition, it is a disability, and is covered by the American for Disabilities Act, a government policy requiring equality in access in employment, education, and spaces for those who are differently abled. Those within the deaf world contends this condition has enabled the creation of a community of deaf individuals to thrive, to create over a period of more than two hundred years a language, a variety of technological means for communication, a substantial educational philosophy, the joining of likely affected individuals in worship and activity and much more.

In *Through Deaf Eyes* the continuum of perspective on the question ‘what is deafness’ is largely defined by the history of deaf experience in America. This is not

surprising since the intention of the film is to provide a history of deafness in the United States. The attachment of the film to a historical subject matter provides a degree of removal from the emotions arising from controversy, not taking a direct position on whether deafness should be defined as a disability or as a condition that allows for a community of commonly affected individuals to share in a common language and culture. As a historical documentary, it is taken as providing objective evidence, and as a work that has been contributed to by a variety of academics the assumption could be that the evidence provided is balanced.

As it moves into the contemporary perspective the film provides less perspective from individuals who advocate for a more exclusive definition of deafness as a disability. According to Ken Chowder, the scriptwriter, this part of the film speaks to the existing opinions of Americans about deafness; a dialog between the film and a mainstream ideology that does not see deafness in terms of culture. The intent of Chowder's take on this topic helps retain balance in mainstream thought by countering the understanding of deafness that is maintained by the majority of hearing Americans. The idea of deafness as a disability is something that Americans are ingrained with through their consumption of popular culture in the form of film and television.

The dialog that Chowder speaks of is evident in the voices that promote the idea of deaf culture over disability and the eye-opening treatment of the historical figure and American hero Alexander Graham Bell. The film does not allow audiences to retain the worship of this American hero and instead highlights some of his less admirable attributes including his advocacy of eugenics and his hope for a world where deaf individuals, like those of the incoming ethnic minorities, would assimilate into

mainstream culture. This perspective, and the modern day equivalent, the belief that the deaf should be mainstreamed, taught orally, and provided a place within the hearing world in order to overcome their disability are quite absent in the film. Only one ‘expert’ with this point of view was included in the film, K. Todd Houston from the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf, and his commentary seemed so out of place in the sea of pro-deaf culture ideology that the effect almost removed any expression of balance that was attempted by the production team.

The stance that *Through Deaf Eyes* takes in promotion of deaf culture works to combat prior televisual representations of deafness as only a disability. Presentation of historical experiences of the deaf provides objective evidence that serves to contextualize the current debate for audiences. Presentation of ‘experts’ that speak for a vibrant deaf community provide proof that there is more to deafness than a lack of hearing ability. The stark contrast between these proselytizers and Mr. Houston creates even more evidence to audiences that they should open their minds to the possibilities presented by this new information that so vehemently combats the view of deafness as disabling and difficult.

#### DISABILITY AND ISOLATION

The film *Through Deaf Eyes* stands at the recent end of a body of filmic work that has explored the nature of deafness. Additionally, the ways that televisual texts present this topic is already a topic of debate in academia. In mass-marketed film, deafness has largely been portrayed as a disability. Films, mostly created by hearing individuals, treat deafness as something to be overcome or as an abnormality. Throughout the filmic history of the deaf subject, the deaf and hard-of-hearing have been portrayed as ‘the

dummy' that is cut off from society or as victims of an abusive dominating hearing person, to the extent of physical violence as in the film *Johnny Belinda*. In the introduction to *The Cinema of Isolation*, author Martin Norden describes the condition of film in creating public opinion about disabled people, stating:

...the movies have played a major role in perpetuating mainstream society's regard for people with disabilities, and more often than not the images borne in those movies have differed sharply from the realities of the physically abled experience.<sup>80</sup>

He asserts that the representation of disability in film has often been marked by isolation; that the disabled characters portrayed in the film are often stigmatized and shunned from the mainstream.

Even as recently as in the documentary *Sound and Fury*, broadcast on PBS stations in 2000, the deaf are portrayed as isolated from the hearing world and 'dummy' characters that should not be taken seriously. In this film the Artinians, a deaf family, are presented as irrational and ill equipped to make decisions about their family and children. In almost every instance where deaf people are speaking about their right to make decisions about whether to provide cochlear implant as an option to their children, they are considered too closely linked to the deaf world to understand that their children would prefer to live in the hearing world. Mari Artinian, a hearing woman who has a deaf son Peter, has decided to implant her child as an infant.

Mari Artinian: "If your child was blind and if there was a surgery to give them eyesight, would you do it? And I know even my parents would say they would do it in a heartbeat. Well if you would do that, why wouldn't you want to offer your child the best and give them an implant?"<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Martin F. Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

<sup>81</sup> Josh Aronson, *Sound and Fury* (WNET Channel 13 New York, 2000).

Mari, a 'hearing' woman believe that the 'deaf' live in isolation because they cannot communicate effectively and immediately with the hearing world. For her, obtaining a cochlear implant is "offering your child the best" because this device provides access to the hearing world.

In this film, even the deaf subjects of the film constantly reinforce the isolation that they felt growing up; not being able to communicate in the hearing world. Nita Artinian, a deaf woman and the mother of three deaf children is struggling with how to respond to her daughter Heather who has told her that she wants a cochlear implant.

Nita Artinian: "I grew up in a family where I was the only deaf person and where the whole town was hearing. It was very frustrating. I never learned how to speak and I felt like an outcast. I don't want Heather to have to go through the same frustrations that I did."<sup>82</sup>

Artinian, like the other deaf subjects in the film, reinforces the isolation that she felt growing up without language and community and despite her own claims that she is a full and complete member of the deaf community, is willing to allow her daughter to make the decision what world she would like to live in. This is not the common perspective in a community that can be very protective of their language and identity and typically do not want the deaf to become part of the hearing world for fear of the destruction of deaf language and culture. In any case, this statement highlights the isolating experience of living with a disability, a common feature of deaf cinema.

By presenting deafness as isolating, the films and television programs that seek to portray this cultural minority are ultimately providing a singular view of this community of individuals that is not balanced or committed to providing a well rounded view of what deaf experience can be. In many ways, these presentations, which exist in popular

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

culture, provide the only entrance into the deaf world that many Americans will be provided. Thus it is not surprising that the majority of Americans cannot understand the full scope of deaf experience.

In *Through Deaf Eyes*, a more balanced presentation of deaf experience is provided. In this film being physically deaf is not marked by isolation, instead it is marked by access to a unique community. The description of the community is vivid and it is placed within the context of the history of education and community activities that all provide a great deal of interaction and communication. Description of the history of education in residential schools portrays the creation of a vibrant deaf culture. Through shared educational experience, deaf individuals come together for reasons that are no longer based entirely upon hearing ability, but instead that focus on acquisition of American Sign Language, storytelling, and common experiences all which continue through adulthood for deaf individuals and provide the roots of personal identity and community-building that stretches far beyond a pathology that is marked by its tendency to isolate.

Despite the detail in the film about the ways that deaf people have come together over time, it does not fully move away from the tradition of portraying deafness as isolating. In many of the interviews that are exhibited in the film, there are moments of wavering where the subjects express their desire to live in both worlds, but feeling isolated from one or the other.

Summer Crider: "I remember when I was growing up because I was so disconnected from my parents, and the fact that they enjoyed music and hearing everything and it was very tough for me... I was just looking for a way that I could get hooked back into their world and feel a part of it like I belonged there somehow..."

Crider got a cochlear implant and entered a mainstream educational program.

...And then I started to recognize that I was different from everyone else. I started to begin to think what makes me different from them and it was this box and this wire that was attached to my head.<sup>83</sup>

Unlike the isolation that is exhibited in other films, earlier films, the isolation that is exhibited in *Through Deaf Eyes* is not based upon the inability of the deaf to interact, but instead it is based upon active choices made by deaf individuals to remain within their own community and not interact with the hearing world. Crider concludes her anecdote by exploring her entrance into the deaf community beginning with her transfer to the Florida School for the Deaf where she returned to using her cochlear implant:

Crider: "My parents were very concerned that once I went to the school for the deaf that I would stop wearing it entirely. I wouldn't speak any longer. I wouldn't wear the implant. But the opposite is what happened and it's because I had confidence in myself."<sup>84</sup>

As we can see in the conclusion of Crider's anecdote, the result is that through her experience, she was able to gain the confidence to exist within the deaf world, but without cutting herself off from the hearing world. The producers of *Through Deaf Eyes* provide a sense of balance in the fact that they allow the true nature of deaf experience to show through the film. Presenting the notion of identity construction, with all of its complications, makes the experiences that are recounted by the subjects more real to the audience. The allowance of a more personal vision of deaf experience that includes the complicated notions of straddling between worlds moves deaf televisual representation from Norden's 'cinema of isolation' which assumes that the disabled are isolated beyond their control to a more balanced representation of identity that shows the agency of the

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<sup>83</sup> Lawrence R. Hott and Diane Garey, *Through Deaf Eyes* (WETA Washington, DC, 2007).

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

deaf population to move between worlds, being able to live exclusively in the deaf world, or embracing both the deaf and hearing experience.

Exploration of the portrayal of deafness as an isolating disability in film and television helps us understand a larger issue. The debate over the portrayal of the deaf as disabled in film and other mass media exists as a microcosm of the larger controversy that exists within the community at large. As such, the way that *Through Deaf Eyes* represents the controversy not only stands to create a truth for non-deaf individuals, but it also acts to reinforce or combat the ways that this topic has been constructed in earlier televisual representations.

By taking these examples into consideration, it is clear that on the topic of disability vs. culture, the producers of *Through Deaf Eyes* have chosen to portray deafness as a viable culture, discounting disability perspectives and providing little balance on the subject, from the skewing of the historical information to present a more advocating view of deaf culture and negative view of the disability perspective advocated by eugenicist Bell and others, to the inclusion of many individuals who exist as a part of the thriving 'deaf culture' community and the exclusion of voices from other perspectives. These choices led to an overall perspective on what balance means in the view of this topic where the producers determined that the pervasive notion of deafness is that of a disability and the role of *Through Deaf Eyes* should be to combat this notion. In many ways these decisions are understood given the lack of balanced education that the hearing world is provided about deafness and the pervasiveness of the 'cinema of isolation' in American popular culture.

## **ORAL VERSUS MANUAL METHODS OF EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION**

Historically, a major debate within the deaf world has surrounded the education of deaf people. Early in American history, there was a great concern over how to educate the deaf about religion. One missionary, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet followed through on his concern for the wellbeing of this underserved minority and began the first school for the deaf in Connecticut. On the heels of this intervention, schools for the deaf popped up throughout the Eastern seaboard. Most of these schools were private and residential allowing for deaf individuals to come together for the first time and begin building a community. Over time, in various eras of deaf education, these schools taught sign or oral methods of communication. More recently, the trend for education of the deaf has centered on mainstreaming deaf children in hearing classrooms, providing interpreters and a variety of speech therapy methods to allow children to learn how to live freely in the hearing world.

The debate over whether deaf children should speak or sign has been controversial for many years, particularly as the outspoken Alexander Graham Bell rallied support for assimilation of the deaf into the hearing world as a campaign towards two ideologies that he felt very strongly about: natives and eugenics. Bell and other oralists believe that by teaching deaf people to speak and read lips that they will be able to integrate into the hearing world where they will have access to all of the same opportunities that afforded to hearing people. Many of the children that endure the difficulties of oral education are the offspring of hearing parents who are unsure of how to 'deal' with having a deaf child and who are concerned about the child's ability to function 'normally' in American society. This desire for the deaf to become normal

functioning members of the hearing community has spanned the history explored in the film *Through Deaf Eyes*.

There are a variety of reasons that this method is rejected within the deaf community and these reasons have differed over time. A contributing factor in the maintenance of manual educational methods is the early use of sign and gesture for communication. Sign language is often seen as the natural language for the deaf and the development of American Sign Language in the United States proves that the deaf community is capable of forming its own means of communication and its own culture. For others, the process of speaking and lip-reading is too difficult to achieve well or tiring to maintain on a daily basis.

Kristen Harmon: “I can say that I was considered a successful oral person, for many years I was mainstreamed in a public school... but in my mid-twenties when I went to graduate school or I was in graduate school, I realized how hard I was working just trying to lipread. It would just completely wear me out.”<sup>85</sup>

For deaf individuals who live mainly in the deaf world, signing is not a hindrance, so they assert the right for the deaf to be educated in their own language. In his essay, “Who’s Itching to Get into Mainstreaming”, Ben Bahan describes the social factors involved in mainstreaming, maintaining that encouraging the assimilation of the deaf into hearing schools goes beyond racial integration where even within integrated settings, students “will still choose to hang around with members of their own cultural/linguistic group.”<sup>86</sup>

Bahan explains his own experience with education, stating:

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<sup>85</sup> Lawrence R. Hott and Diane Garey, *Through Deaf Eyes* (WETA Washington, DC, 2007).

<sup>86</sup> Ben Bahan, “Who’s Itching to Get into Mainstreaming?” in *American Deaf Culture: An Anthology*, Sherman Wilcox, ed. (Burtonsville, MD: Linstok Press, 1989), 174.

I felt I was physically integrate-able until I was transferred to a school for the deaf, where I discovered I could be integrated in many more levels: physical, social, mental, and spiritual.<sup>87</sup>

*Through Deaf Eyes* is only one documentary account of the oral versus manual debate in deaf education; however it attacks the subject from a unique perspective, the historical perspective. In this way, a good deal of the material and evidence provided comes from an objective point of view, that of the historian. The film provides a chronological outline of when oral or manual methods of education were favored and contextualizes these with the social issues that were present at the time that contributed to these decisions. One example of this is the commentary about eugenics and Alexander Graham Bell alluded to previously. The perspectives provided in the film on Bell and his role in the deaf community come from a fairly negative point-of-view, providing information that does not glorify the important figure, though this is another case where balance is achieved mainly through dialog with the public perception of Bell as an American hero. While the perspective on Bell provided in the film remains harsh, writer Ken Chowder describes that his original script was considered too ‘anti-hearing’ and that he should “take it back half a turn” to the representation that exists in the final broadcast version.<sup>88</sup>

In the film, with each historical era complete context was provided to proclaim the debate of oral versus manual as a matter-of-fact or at least a matter-of-circumstance. In addition, this is one topic where there seems to be inclusion of perspectives from two sides of the ‘disability debate’. K. Todd Houston, a representative from the Alexander

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 175.

<sup>88</sup> Ken Chowder, Interview by author, notes, San Francisco, CA (by phone), 26 March 2008.

Graham Bell Association explains the position of his organization in the promotion of oral education, but acknowledging that oral education does not work for all deaf students.

K. Todd Houston: “There have always been what’s referred to as oral failures. The technology of the day was limited and those children may have had more difficulty developing spoken language.<sup>89</sup>”

The producers of the film ask Kristen Harmon to display her oral success, and as through spoken word, she discusses that even though she was a successful oral deaf student, there are still problems with being trained orally.

Kristen Harmon: “Understand that speaking is only one way. And that if I speak the other person hears me. They assume that I don’t need any sort of interpreting or any kind of sign or anything like that. And that’s the problem with speaking. It’s a two-way communication.<sup>90</sup>”

By opening up the debate on oral education to this subject, the producers bring out another issue with oral education, one that is not a major focus of the film.

*Through Deaf Eyes* also brings the debate into a more modern perspective, which centers on the story of two schools, an oral school and a manual school, and the experience that students have in each location. The oral school, the famed Clarke School for the Deaf in Northampton, Massachusetts, provides a full education in spoken English where students learn lip-reading, speech and are often aided by cochlear implants or hearing aids. The manual school presented, the Maryland School for the Deaf, is a well-respected manual school where students are taught entirely in ASL. The film expresses the sentiment provided by Bahan: that manual education provides an integrated experience, where students have a sense of community and grow at a level higher than standard American education.

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<sup>89</sup> Lawrence R. Hott and Diane Garey, *Through Deaf Eyes* (WETA Washington, DC, 2007).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

In the context of the debate on oral and manual preference in deaf education, *Through Deaf Eyes* presents a view that provides a degree of balance in the focus on a more objective historical perspective. The use of interviews that present both perspectives the production team shows commitment to presenting a balanced and informative position on this subject. The observation of the experiences in both manual and oral schools reinforces the information provided by the interviewees, and as an added benefit, the background of the two families that were depicted are similar, two hearing parents who are working to educate deaf children. This shows the reality within the deaf community that parents, both hearing and deaf, want to provide adequate opportunities for their children and will allow them access to deaf schools, either manual or oral.

Finally, *Through Deaf Eyes* presents perspectives from Summer Crider, Kristen Harmon, and others that reinforce Bahan's first-person account that manual education provides an additional benefit of creating a well-rounded educational experience. The ambivalence to being fully integrated into the hearing world is a common experience within the deaf community, and is presented fairly accurately and transparently in the film. Other televisual presentations of this debate present a much more diminished view of the deaf point-of-view, taking few forays into the deaf experience with education, instead focusing the experiences of mainstreaming and oral education.

### **BECOMING A ROBOT: TECHNOLOGY IN THE DEAF COMMUNITY**

Throughout history, technology has been implemented within and 'against' the deaf community for dual purposes: in order to aid in communication amongst deaf people, and to aid in communication between the deaf and the hearing. Deaf communities often utilize 'hearing' technologies in order to communicate amongst

themselves. They print their own newspapers and magazines. The newspaper *The Silent Worker*, first published in 1888, helped early American deaf communities maintain connections over long distances.<sup>91</sup> This publication and others changed the ways that deaf people interacted with each other and helped to develop a cohesive group identity through shared knowledge, ultimately helping create what is now known as ‘deaf culture’. The tradition of appropriating common ‘hearing’ communications devices for their own purposes continued with the invention of the TTY machine in 1964 by deaf physicist Robert Weitbrecht. This type of appropriation continues today with the use of online blogs, and even more appropriately video blogs (commonly called vlogs) by ASL and other sign language speakers in order to visually communicate with other deaf people in their own natural language.

Technology has not always been used to provide communicational benefit for the deaf community. Some technologies are more pointedly created for the purpose of assimilating the deaf community rather than appropriated by the community for their own use. Hearing aids were developed with the to help the ‘deaf’ and hard-of-hearing to be able to harness the little amount of hearing that they possessed and amplify it, allowing them to become part of the hearing community. It is not uncommon for deaf people to wear hearing aids in order to experience some parts of ‘hearing life’ and to maintain links with both the deaf and the hearing worlds.

Hearing aids are external devices that are utilized for assistance and do not negatively affect the user. Recently, though, medical technology has developed and

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<sup>91</sup> WRLC Libraries Digital & Special Collections, “The Silent Worker,” Library Collections, *WRLC Aladin*, <http://www.aladin.wrlc.org/gsd/collect/gasw/gasw.shtml> (accessed 9 April 2008).

popularized the cochlear implant, a medical surgery with a device that is directly implanted into the brain through a medical procedure, brain surgery, in order to bypass the faulty biological hearing devices of the deaf body and allow sound to be directly interpreted by the brain. For those who wish to become part of the hearing world, cochlear implants can be a miracle ‘cure’ for deafness, allowing some candidates to hear sound very functionally. The deaf continue to be concerned about the advancement of cochlear implant surgery in their community. The invasiveness of the procedure and the necessity of a technological apparatus are considered unacceptable; many deaf people see implanted individuals as technological machines or robots.

The controversy surrounding cochlear implants is the subject of the documentary film *Sound and Fury*. In *Sound and Fury* the use of technology as a cure is debated mainly between the hearing and deaf members the Artinian family, with the deaf members of the family vehemently arguing against acquiring cochlear implants and the hearing members of the family arguing refusal to allow the surgery equates to child abuse if receiving a cochlear implant could allow the child a ‘normal’ existence.

Peter Artinian, Sr.: “If I didn’t know you I would say you are an abusing parent because you have an opportunity to take a handicap and correct it... You are preventing a cure for deafness to take place because you are so involved with the Deaf that you really want your children to continue to be deaf and if they function in the hearing world well then that’s fine but they’ve got to be deaf first. That’s wrong.”

Marianne Artinian: “You’d have to use the term abusive. I find it hard using that that because they’re my children and they’re good parents...”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Josh Aronson, *Sound and Fury* (WNET Channel 13 New York, 2000).

For many deaf people, medical technology that serves to take deaf children out of the deaf community is a way for hearing people to try to destroy the rich and thriving deaf culture.

*Through Deaf Eyes* shows a commitment to the portrayal of technology in a balanced manner beyond the broadcast of the film. For example, the website for *Through Deaf Eyes* on the PBS.ORG domain also provides a good deal of information on “Technology as a Cultural Force” where the issues surrounding cochlear implants are presented and where additional information on films and TTY are presented.<sup>93</sup> The commitment of the production team to provide a balanced view of technology is evident in the film, on the website, and in other outreach materials.

The paragraph provided in the discussion guide, can even be parsed equally into a pro- and con- statements about the cochlear implant. On the pro-side the production team explores how cochlear implants help aid some individuals and allow for normal language use:

Cochlear implants are changing the deaf community because they enable infants and young children who are deaf to have access to spoken language at much clearer levels and at very early ages when their brains are most primed to learn language. As a result of implants, more children who are deaf will have intelligible speech skills and usable hearing.

On the con-side, the producers address the strain that cochlear implants put on deaf culture including the fears of a ‘dying out’ of American Sign Language as way that the deaf can identify with their core culture:

The challenge for the Deaf cultural core group will be to assure that these children have a right to learn American Sign Language and to learn about

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<sup>93</sup> Stacey Schwartz, “Deaf Life: Technology as a Cultural Force,” *Through Deaf Eyes* / PBS, 2007, <http://www.pbs.org/weta/throughdeafeyes/deaf-life/technology.html> (accessed 4 April 2008).

their identities as deaf people. Seeing that ASL and Deaf Culture can be retained, even while technology is harnessed, has led more and more deaf adults to get cochlear implants.<sup>94</sup>

In the film and other presentations of the information by the filmmakers, it is evident they the major focus is on the act of communication and how each type of technology is used for communication. The film provides many examples of cochlear implant recipients who have had very different experiences with the device. Rory Osbrink, a teacher at the California School of the Deaf in Fremont, was implanted early in life. He describes the realization that his implant was not natural:

Rory Osbrink: “My friends, in general, I would say, treated me pretty good. With the exception of the cochlear implant which was really obvious. Then the remarks started to come. They called me a freak. They said I was strange. They’d say, what’s that? Is it really part of your body? It’s like a foreign object.”

In the film, the interview with Osbrink does not include any particularly negative assertions about cochlear implants; instead it describes his personal experience. Despite his presentation in the film, he does stand as an advocate for ensuring that children have a say in whether they receive a cochlear implant, a position that may have pointed the film in another direction.<sup>95</sup>

Another example of the presentation of cochlear implant technology in the film *Through Deaf Eyes* is with the inclusion of the short film “Equilibrium” by deaf filmmaker Andrean Mangiardi. This film explores the personal experience of using an implant and the struggle and discomfort for making the implant work well. The subject

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<sup>94</sup> Stacey Schwartz, “Resources: Discussion Guide,” *Through Deaf Eyes / PBS*, 2007, <http://www.pbs.org/weta/throughdeafeyes/resources/background.html> (accessed 4 April 2008).

<sup>95</sup> Arthur Allen, “Sound and fury,” *Salon.com Health*, May 25, 2000, <http://archive.salon.com/health/feature/2000/05/24/cochlear/index.html> (accessed 4 April 2008).

of the film is submitted to piercing sounds and his face shows a good deal of pain through its contortions. It explores the device as a technology or tool by creating a visual metaphor with the external portion of the device and the image of a wrench. The end result of the film is the ability of the subject to hear music, the sound of water dripping, and his girlfriend profess her love to him, all sounds that are seemingly enjoyable.

Some technologies used in the deaf community are not intended to specifically bridge the gap between the deaf and hearing worlds, but the technology is also not presented with the express purpose of providing a means of intercultural communication and cultural perpetuation. In *Children of a Lesser God*, we see how technology is used to help the deaf 'hear' music through vibrations. The teacher, James Leeds (played by William Hurt) uses a record player with speakers at a loud volume to encourage a deaf teenager to verbalizing lyrics and progress in speech therapy. In this way, technology is utilized both to aid in helping the deaf understand a sensory experience in the same ways that hearing people understand music, but on a more educational level, this trick of the senses is used as a tool to help teach speech verbalization to a bunch of deaf students. This topic is also explored in *Through Deaf Eyes* with a feature on the band "Beethoven's Nightmare". The band discusses vibration, which helps deaf band members play and deaf audiences appreciate the music.

In *Through Deaf Eyes*, the view of technology is presented as a matter of existence. Technologies are utilized daily by deaf individuals to communicate within and outside of their own community. Open floor plans are used in homes to ensure that sight is the dominant means of communicating within spaces and TTY machines and videophones help the deaf communicate over distances. Some technologies are presented

as benefiting the deaf by helping them assimilate into the hearing world and some are shown as helping the deaf communicate without the necessity of integration. The production team provided a balance of perspectives in discourse surrounding technologies of the deaf, struggling to counteract the representations presented in *Sound and Fury*, which showed only a very pointed and constructed view of assimilation through use of cochlear implants and other technologies.

#### **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS/CONCLUSION**

This chapter has considered three major debates within the deaf community. These are not by any means the only topics that were considered by the production staff in order to present particular views of deaf culture. The film presents a carefully constructed view of the topics, at points informing about the different perspectives and taking care not to advocate any, but at other moments presenting only one perspective as a singular representation of the deaf community in order to balance public opinion about deafness.

The major contributing factor to achieving balance in this film was the construction of a production structure that was created to provide the prospective of a variety of viewpoints within the deaf community. The organizational structure of the production team ensures that multiple perspectives are considered for a final representation through a hierarchy that includes collaboration between the different groups who provide specialized expertise. The various authors of the film help provide a more balanced view of the deaf experience than what had been achieved in earlier documentary and feature films.

## **PRODUCTION STRUCTURES: HIERARCHY AND COLLABORATION IN AUTHORSHIP**

### **INTRODUCTION**

There are many techniques that can be employed in order to acquire knowledge about a subject. In this project the subject under discussion is the production of a mass media representation, *Through Deaf Eyes*. As such the techniques used to determine the ethics and politics behind the portrayal of a cultural minority should reflect those who are creating the representations. In television production, these creators fall are categorized in a structured hierarchy of individuals and institutions that work together to produce a public television documentary film. As such, this chapter is devoted to the exploration of the structures of production, particularly of the hierarchy of collaboration.

This chapter uncovers the hierarchical structures of a public television production staff. Analysis of these structures unearths production elements that determine the staff's decision-making strategies; tactics for representing deaf culture in the ways that the previous chapter outlines. Examination of these organizational structures provides additional insight into the degree that representative decisions were questioned, contemplated, and resolved.

This chapter illuminates some of the mysteries behind the creation of deaf portrayals in *Through Deaf Eyes* by interpreting the interplay between different 'classes' of individuals and institutions, understanding what each has at stake in the creation of the film, and to what degree there is a hierarchy of power and collaboration between the classes. The complicated relationships of power in the production structure are relationships based upon mutual respect and collaboration, but also determined by

position. The structure formed by these relationships lend to the ways that final representations were determined and the concept of balance was conceived. The resulting hierarchy influences what the public sees through a public television presentation; what they understand about deaf culture, and what the authors of the film intended for them to believe. These topics are explored through two models of structural analysis – a dual-organization model and an authorial model – to highlight the collaborative and authoritative relationships within the production team organization.

### **WHAT'S IN A PRODUCTION STRUCTURE?**

The presentation of the ‘culture of media production’ for *Through Deaf Eyes* that is written in this chapter needs to be accurate and rigorous in order to maintain the same degree of oversight that is called for in televisual presentations of culture. It should be acknowledged that hierarchies in organization are both necessary and acceptable in the scope of mass media production. A strategic approach to examining the structures of production is vital to assure that the models created for explanation are adequately explain the relevant notions of authorship and power to make broadcast and representation decisions without damaging the parties involved.

For a broadcast documentary, the ability to recreate an accurate and subjectively produced representation relies on a fluid organization of production staff that is both effective in its hierarchies and open in its collaboration. The organization of a documentary film team varies widely from project to project. In public broadcasting productions there are institutional mandates in place dictating that the production team must include experts or advisors to ensure accuracy of representation. For this reason,

the structure of *Through Deaf Eyes* is particularly unique, but it also provides insight into the authorities that determine the perspectives of cultural depictions.

There is precedent in examining the organization structure of public broadcasting documentaries which helps inform the ways that information can be ascertained by the production hierarchies. Barry Dornfeld, an anthropologist and documentary filmmaker, undertook ethnography of the production of a documentary series called *Childhood*, which was produced in partnership with WNET for public broadcasting in the early 1990s. This ethnography, entitled *Producing Public Television, Producing Public Culture*, deals specifically with issues in cultural representation, as the series explores the topic of childhood from a variety of cultural perspectives, in developed and developing societies around the world.<sup>96</sup> Dornfeld applied classical ethnographic practice to his fieldwork, working on the production staff as a member of the team (participant observation), which provided him with access to many of the decisions surrounding which groups to portray, and how to represent these cultural groups. His ethnography describes many facets of the production, including the issues raised and decisions made in depicting cultural 'others'. One of the most constructive elements utilized by Dornfeld in his discourse on the production of cultural knowledge for mass distribution is his analysis of the structural organization of the production team and the ways that authorship and power are contested among the parties involved in the creation of portrayals of culture. Dornfeld's methods of analysis help inform how the structure of the *Through Deaf Eyes* production team can be used to find deeper meaning in the

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<sup>96</sup> Barry Dornfeld, *Producing Public Television, Producing Public Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

relationships and interactions within the structural group and highlight the degrees of personal and institutional power over authorship of the film and its constituent parts.

Dornfeld's ethnography focuses on the analysis of the organizational structures of the *Childhood* series, a series similar to *Through Deaf Eyes* in that it presents cultural issues and it is created for broadcast on public television. Dornfeld places the *Childhood* series in its social, economic, and political contexts, but he also presents the framework of the media organization. Within this institutional framework, he explores processes of production, funding and economic models, the position of the series within the public broadcasting system, and the position of the documentary series within the genre of documentary film. Amongst all of his analysis, the one that most parallels *Through Deaf Eyes* is the organization of the production team and the inclusion of project advisors. The creation of a cultural representation relies heavily on the backgrounds and experiences of the creators of the portrayal. With a variety of different backgrounds being represented on the production team of *Through Deaf Eyes*, it is important to determine the role that each voice plays in the final representation, the degree of agency each voices has, the amount of power each group within the production team holds in relation to the other parts, and the amount of collaboration between each part. In order to explore these questions, we have to create accurate models that can organize the team into its constituent parts and determine the relationships between each section. This chapter explores the production team through two models, a model of 'dual organization' that idealizes the collaborative aspects of the production team, and a model of authorship that examines *all* of the voices have agency in representation deaf experience as they fall into a hierarchical system of authority.

A full-fledged ethnographic methodology would have been ideal for exploring the decision-making process on the *Through Deaf Eyes* project; however the film was produced and broadcast prior to the initiation of research. In lieu of this process, analysis of the structures of production in will uncover the ‘corporate culture’ that largely determines the way that minority cultures are represented on public television. The production structures tell their own tale of the creation of cultural representations, allowing greater access to the ways that issues were resolved and the underlying ethics of the production negating the necessity of asking for a more subjective perspective from the producers, editors, and advisors.

#### **THE ‘DUAL ORGANIZATION’ MODEL: BALANCE AND INEQUALITY**

Ethnographic methodologies for research are valuable in assessing the structures of production because they help to order the relationships between individuals, groups, and institutions within the production team. The field of anthropology has been utilizing observation, participant observation, and interviewing to uncover structures since the late 1950s when Claude Levi-Strauss first argued for a structural approach to the field. His seminal work, *Structural Anthropology* includes a variety of topics that are immediately relevant to the ‘culture of production’ in *Through Deaf Eyes* from ‘archaism’ which is applicable to cultural advisors who are experts, though unfamiliar with production process to linguistic and kinship analysis, which describes the dichotomies between the producers (ethnographer class) and the advisors (the subject class), All of Levi-Strauss’ assertions in these many different instances create a complete theory on social organization, in both the filmmaker’s study of the deaf world as well as research into a

society of cultural knowledge producers that includes two divergent parts of a production team (see Figures 2 and 3 below).

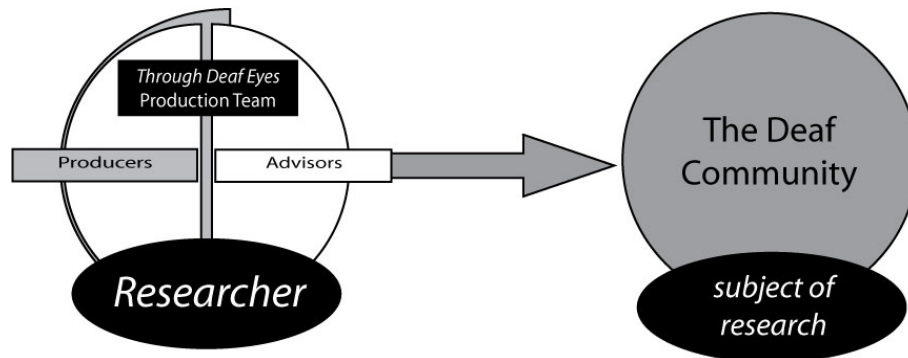


FIGURE 2: THE PRODUCTION TEAM OF *THROUGH DEAF EYES* EXPLORES THE SUBJECT OF DEAF CULTURE AND HISTORY

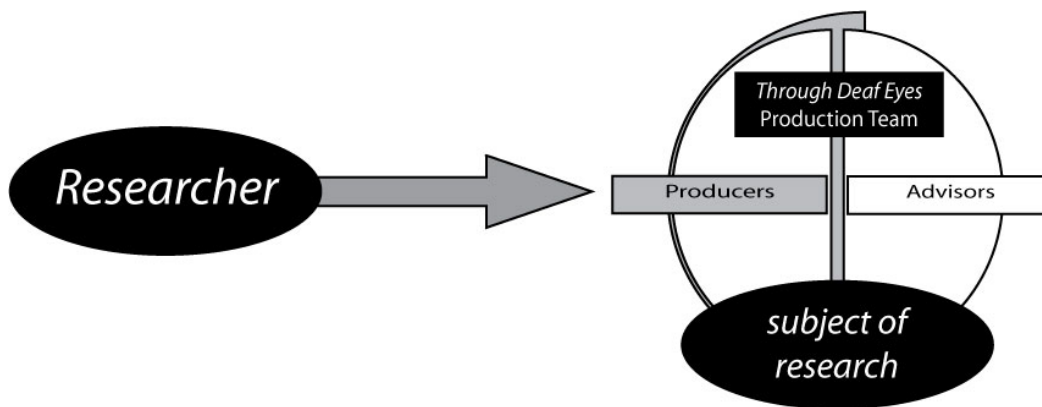


FIGURE 3: THE RESEARCHER STUDIES THE 'CORPORATE CULTURE' OF A PUBLIC BROADCASTING PRODUCTION TEAM

This seminal work helped define the course of ethnographic theory. One reason that Levi-Strauss' structural approach became so influential was that it examined more complicated social organizations that could not be described by the simplistic models that were suggested by the Functionalists. For example, Levi-Strauss provides an initial dialogue on 'dual organization'; complex social groups that contain collaborating parts

that combined create a social whole.<sup>97</sup> ‘Dual organization’ was first described by the functionalists in terms of some tribal groups such as Radin’s depiction of the Winnebago or Malinowski’s conception of the Trobriand Islanders. Levi-Strauss takes the model further and introduces a variety of modifications to the theory. The production team of the film *Through Deaf Eyes* can be considered a pure dual organization; it can be described by both the functional and the structural approach to the model.

A ‘dual organization’ is defined as a moiety system, a social system that is divided into two equal parts that both contribute to the working of society. For example the Winnebago culture that is divided into the ‘wangeregi’ and the ‘manegi’, each half of the culture has rights and responsibilities in the society, but each of the two segments exists with a different (and generally opposite) function.<sup>98</sup> Each half many have some semblance of independence in roles, but a ‘dual organization society’ cannot appropriately function unless the responsibilities of each moiety are combined.

According to Levi-Strauss, earlier theoreticians tended to regard these two halves as inherently equal as “a balanced and symmetrical dichotomy”, but the production team of *Through Deaf Eyes*, much like the more complex societies addressed in his discourse, are “conceived of in terms of opposition, with the one difference that the opposition is, with regard to social and/or religious prestige, necessarily unequal.”<sup>99</sup>

The two main sets of individuals and institutions involved in the making of *Through Deaf Eyes* are, although not wholly opposed, some of the ‘producers’ delved so deeply into their research for this project that they learned ASL and began to become part

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<sup>97</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 4th (New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc., 1963), 133-140.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 133.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 139.

of the ‘deaf’ world as a friend and advocate and some of the ‘advisors’ are not functionally deaf at all, but instead have different experiences with the deaf community including growing up with deaf family, and educating in deaf schools. Regardless of the overlap between the two moieties, the intention of the structure is this opposition. One half of the team, namely “the producers”, was ‘selected’ for its technical expertise, prestige within the public broadcasting community, and ability to bring in funding through large-scale federal grants. The other half, “the advisors”, was chosen for their personal experience, academic knowledge on the subject of deafness, deaf culture, ASL, or deaf history, and prestige within the deaf community. Each group provides a vital function to the production deaf culture representations in *Through Deaf Eyes* and each lends its own influence to the groups where it holds its own power.

Through this short description one might see these two parts as both having equal function and a good degree of balance (what would be described by a functional anthropologist’s expression of a ‘dual social organization’) however upon closer look, the inequality between these two major parts of the production team becomes more apparent. As a minority group, the advisors struggle to be heard in the hearing world. Martin Norden states “Occasionally, people with disability act as advisors on a film, but ultimately the authorship of the movie rests with one or more able-bodied people.”<sup>100</sup> Often the majority hearing population lacks the interest and intent of discovering the nuances of the deaf community which leaves this small social group largely unknown not only to most of American society, but more importantly to the powerful elite within the world of mass communication, the federal government, television and film production,

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<sup>100</sup> Martin F. Norden, *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 4.

and most of the other institutions that are able to place influence over what is broadcast over the airwaves.

This 'dual organization model' describes the structure of the production team in a functional approach, its balance, as well as in a structural approach, its inequality. The final story that this model tells is how these two halves work together to create the representation that is exhibited in the film. Each part is a moiety; separate from the other the parts are unable to create a functional, accurate, or ethical representation of deaf culture and history. In order for the producers to create a transparent and accurate presentation of deaf culture, they require extensive input and education on the subject from people who have lived with this experience, the advisors. Similarly, in order for the advisors to present what they see as an adequate presentation of their life experiences, they require a highly skilled and well-respected group of experts in production and broadcasting. The 'yin-and-yang' of this relationship is exhibited in Figure 4 below.

## Through Deaf Eyes Production Team Dual Organization Model



FIGURE 4: DUAL ORGANIZATION MODEL OF *THROUGH DEAF EYES* PRODUCTION TEAM

By examining the production team under the model of a ‘dual organization’ we can better understand the influence each group holds over the production of the representation, examining the functional difference between the two halves. This model explains how each half acts as an intermediary with other powerful institutions and groups that are necessary for the creation of the film on the one hand, and positive

reception of the film on the other. Each half has a role to play, equal or not, in order creating the most accurate and acceptable representation of deafness, deaf history, and deaf culture as is possible within the scope of the medium.

### **THE AUTHORIAL MODEL: HIERARCHY AND COLLABORATION IN MULTIVOCALITY**

This section uncovers another model of organization of the *Through Deaf Eyes* production team and explains how this structure is relevant in understanding the ways that authorship and power contribute to the creation of the particular representations of deaf culture that exist within the film and that were explored in the previous chapter. This structure helps explain the context of an examination of production-side evaluation of cultural representation-making because it helps to unravel the complicated definition of ‘who is the author of the text *Through Deaf Eyes*’ and thus answers the question ‘who is responsible for the creation of content and for the particular leanings and biases that exist in the representation of culture in the text?’ The chart below (Figure 5) graphically depicts the model of authorship for the production team, including the major production-side authors – the producer-authors, the advisor-authors, the ‘native’ producer-authors, and the subject-authors – but it excludes the reception-side authors – the deaf audiences and the hearing audiences as well as the critics of the film; although production-side authors may have incorporated a prediction of what reception of the film might be, the reception-authors do not directly contribute to the production of the representation of deaf culture that is provided in the film.

This section looks at two major elements of an authorial model of production for *Through Deaf Eyes*: the function of each of the types of authors – what each voice brings to the production of a cultural representation of the deaf – and the power that is

appropriated to each author group. In this way an author structure describes the flows of information and relationships between the author groups, but it also illuminates the hierarchy of the production team to explore which author voices have more weight in the final portrayal of deaf culture within the film. These two veins of the authorship model address the creation of a cultural representation to answer questions about who is speaking, who has agency, and who contributes as an author.

#### AUTHOR, VOICE, AND AGENCY

‘Author’ and ‘text’ are most often used to describe the written word the writer of the written word, however the theories that describe the relationship between author and text as well as the production of the text by the author can also apply to the relationship between the producers of a film and that film and the process of production of the film. The authorial model of the production of *Through Deaf Eyes* seeks to use literary theory to explain the nuances in ownership of a representation and conceptions of author, voice, and agency to explain these relationships in power and collaboration. This section will explore the concept of ‘authorship’ and the differences between having a voice and being an author, the relationship between authorship and power.

One major reason why the concept of ‘author’ is so vital in terms of this project is that it close examination of the production process does not discount or exclude the authorial voice, a trend in literary, cultural, and media studies in post-structuralism, usually associated with Roland Barthes’ essay “The Death of the Author” which criticizes the association of the biography of an author with the text that they are creating.<sup>101</sup>

Theorist Michel Foucault elaborates on the principles of authorship in “What is an

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<sup>101</sup> Barthes, Roland. “Death of the Author” in *Image-Music-Text*. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1977).

author?” which focuses on the relationship between the author and his audience.<sup>102</sup>

Foucault explains and debates the common assumption of the ‘death of the author’ – a theoretical position stating that the author is no longer provided the luxury of intention in the reception of their work, and the meaning that is ascribed to their work. He describes that a written text is solely a recorded moment within the “circuit of ownership” of a discourse.<sup>103</sup>

This discussion of the annihilation of the author is necessary because the work of cultural theorists who focus their attention to reception of texts takes serious issue with the entire premise of an analysis of production. The importance of the production of texts must be acknowledged to combat the ‘death of the author’; the authors of texts are presenting a mediated view of culture and society that can and does influence the ways that audiences assign meaning to the texts. Foucault assists in this regard by associating importance to the author-function and linking it to the institutions and organizations and in this way allows us to examine producers in the context of the power structures that they work within acknowledging that their role is consequential to both the creation of a text and the ultimate reception of that text.

The relationship between author and power is concrete. The authors or producers of the ‘text’ provide significant influence over the creation of all aspects of the content including the ways that culture and difference are maintained in the text. Following the post-structural criticism of authorship, this section will not look too specifically at the biographical distinctness of the authors aside from basic generalities (whether they are

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<sup>102</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, Josue V. Harari, ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), 141-160.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 148-149.

part of the deaf or hearing community and within which institutions and organizations they are associated). Instead, this authorship model will follow Foucault's defense, examining the different variety of authors that are involved in the discourse of deaf culture within the film *Through Deaf Eyes* and the ways in which power and institutions bear down upon the agency of these different types of authors in their creation of cultural representations.

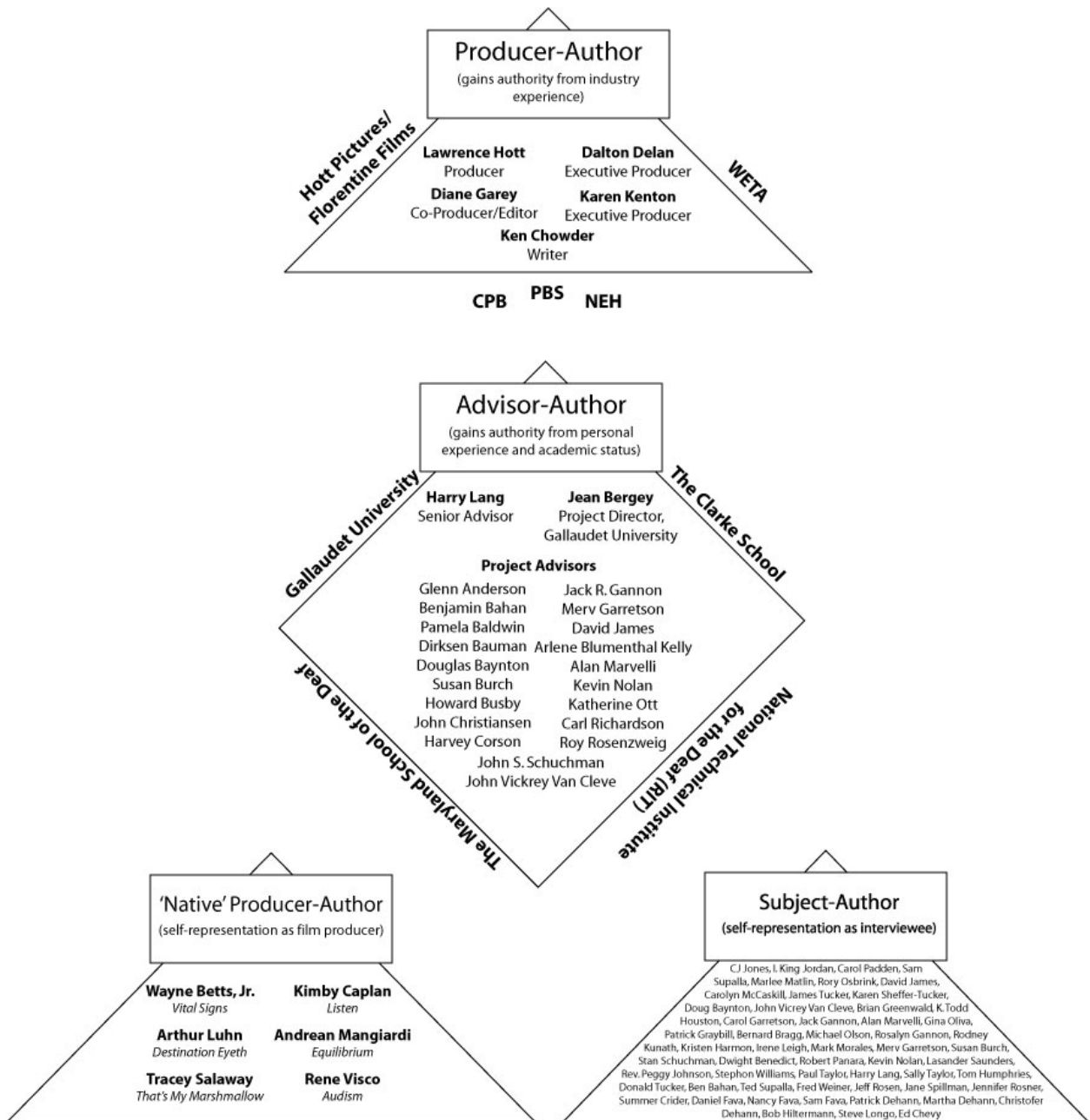


FIGURE 5: AUTHORSHIP MODEL OF *THROUGH DEAF EYES* PRODUCTION TEAM

#### AUTHORIAL STRUCTURE

The structure of the production team, like many structures, is entirely up to interpretation. This model explains idea of authorship and ‘who has the right to speak’ for a cultural minority, through three levels of hierarchy; a paradigm that explains both

the differences in authority and power status between the groups, but also the intended collaboration between the groups of authors. These two aspects of the structure that are seemingly contradictory are the focus of this section as they show the complex nature of working within the public broadcasting system. This system is equally concerned with high production quality and informative and educational programming whose content exceeds the commercial standards of broadcast and cable production. With these requirements, it is evident that hierarchy (which ensures quality) and collaboration (which ensures accuracy in information) are not mutually exclusive.

This model (Figure 5 above) includes a majority of the individuals and institutions that were involved in the production of this film. This depiction of the organizational structure shows individual authors within the sections and institutional authors surrounding the sections. The individuals within each of the shapes are often influenced by the institutions that they belong to, however if they are specifically portrayed, their authorial intention exists both as part of and apart from the institutions with which they are associated. The institutions that are mentioned in the model have varying degrees of influence upon the creation of the film and are described in this section as determined by their relevance to the decisions that were made. Ultimately, most of the content of the cultural representations was created by collaboration between individuals, where institutional influence occurred only as much as the individuals were speaking as follower of the institutional 'line'.

The three levels included in this model are broken down into the career producers for whom 'deaf culture' is a topic of presentation on the small screen, advisors for whom 'deaf culture' is both a life experience and an academic pursuit, and a third level with two

parts: deaf filmmakers for whom 'deaf culture' is a life experience and a subject of personal expression (i.e. self-representation of their personal and cultural experiences), and interviewees who are provided an opportunity to speak and affect the way that deaf culture is represented through their anecdotes and life experiences. All of the sections are inexplicably linked due to the collaborative nature of the production, where the producer-authors worked closely with advisors to create the story and content, to be allowed access to individuals and institutions, to get feedback on issues of interest within the community and determine the best ways that these issues be portrayed, to receive assistance in translation of ASL into spoken English and written English for use in captioning, and for advice on editing and inclusion and exclusion of materials, topics, and more. The 'bottom' tier of author includes deaf filmmakers, whose voices are indeed a great part of the film; however they were not included to the same degree in the major decision-making process about the direction of the film. Their voices were included as an afterthought to some degree in order to place contemporary personal experiences in the film in conjunction with discourse and debate surrounding the major issues within deaf culture. The last section, also in the lowest tier of authorship, are the voices of the interviewees (many of whom were also project advisors) who hold authorial power because they are allowed to share their own story, but whose contributions were entirely subject to the editing and advisement of the producer-authors and advisor-authors above them.

The producer-authors, as the highest level in the hierarchy of production, hold the greatest power over content. They determine what story gets told through the writing of the script and the editing of the footage. These producers, directors, writers, and editors

are the final word in who gets interviewed and what content of interview is included in the final presentation. The Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and the Greater Washington Educational Telecommunications Association (WETA) hold institutional power and authority over what ‘the public will want to see’ and in what direction the documentary should move in order to achieve the highest production value, educational/informational output, and Nielsen ratings. This top level of authority holds a high degree of power over what the documentary looked and sounded like and what representation got broadcast to television viewers.

Although these producer-authors hold such a high degree of power over the representation of deaf culture, they were not unaware of the issues involved in a majority culture producing a portrayal of a minority culture. Lawrence Hott, producer and owner of Hott Productions, a division of Florentine Films, explains that there were many issues that arose about his role as a “hearing filmmaker making a film about the deaf.” In an early presentation of the project, He is faced with this unwelcome realization when an audience member points out “*you’re* talking about making a film of *our* entire diverse community.” Hott understands that this is a valid criticism and that his authority is not fixed, so in order to impart humor to the situation, he asks, “Could I get water and a stiff Martini up here?”<sup>104</sup>

The scriptwriter of the film, Ken Chowder, has highlighted another interesting nuance: specifically that there exists also correction within the sub-sect of producer-authors. Ken’s role as a writer is to layout the best story which was not always the best way to achieve the goals of the film including providing the balance necessary to make

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<sup>104</sup> Transcript of the *Through Deaf Lives* Conference. Provided by Lawrence Hott on February 18, 2008 (emphasis mine).

the film viable as a public broadcasting initiative. Chowder entered the project near the start of the project helping to direct the story of the film instead of coming in later after the footage was already shot which happens with some types of documentary, specifically nature types of film where the story is fully dependent on “whether the lion eats the gazelle.”<sup>105</sup> The relationship between Chowder and the rest of the producer-authors was one of continual self-correction and collaboration. His perception of a good story is not particularly concerned with such concepts as ‘balance’ so in some instances he would write and then Hott and Garey would return to his script and ‘correct’ it to ensure that both sides of the story were present.

The advisory staff, a staff that largely consists of deaf professors and historians, has both an academic and a personal interest in deaf culture and history and accepts the median level of authority. This group of advisors is slightly more diverse than the highest level of authority, in that these advisors come from a diversity of backgrounds, growing up deaf or hearing, in deaf households or hearing households, coming from different educational experiences, and entertaining diverse perspectives on the issues that arise within the deaf community and that are explored by the film. These advisors are associated with a variety of institutions, though many come from Gallaudet, the oldest deaf university in the United States and a large supporter of ASL use and deaf culture. The role of the advisors is to present deaf life and experience to the producer-authors, help them select the relevant topics and stories that are told in the film, provide insight into difficult topics for the hearing production staff to understand, and access to members

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<sup>105</sup> Ken Chowder, Interview by author, notes, San Francisco, CA (by phone), 26 March 2008.

of the deaf community that may have been hesitant to speak to the ‘hearing producers of a deaf film’.

The advisory staff has a particularly unique voice, and they are as authors, able to construct the nature of what the producer-authors *think* about the deaf community. They provide the first-person perspectives that the producer-authors are most willing to accept as viable for inclusion in the film. These authors are also in some ways considered too closely aligned with the agenda of deaf culture, to provide a one-sided perspective that encourages the advancement of this cause. In this way, the advisor-authors are structurally located in a position of checks-and-balances. They are offered a degree of power over self-representers, helping determine the accuracy and adequacy of their messages, and they are given unique influence over the opinions of the producer-authors, but they are still held under the thumb of the people and institutions who are working to ensure that multiple perspectives are presented in the film and that no particular agenda is being maintained.

The ‘self-representers’ are a group of authors that are provided agency through their storytelling. These individuals provide evidence within the film through their personal experiences and their particular knowledge on the subjects of deaf culture and history. These authors are split into two groups, the deaf filmmakers whose short films were included as part of the film in order to offer a ‘native’ voice/perspective to the film, and the subjects of the interviews that are interspersed throughout the film. The filmmakers were provided uncanny agency in presenting their personal viewpoints about deaf experience. Their films are deeply personal and the aesthetic qualities of the films were maintained even when they did not match the aesthetic of the remainder of *Through*

*Deaf Eyes*. These films, though, were selected for inclusion in the film; the subject matter of the films was deemed to fit within the storyline of *Through Deaf Eyes* and the skill of the filmmaker to present a high-class representation was a necessity. Beyond this, many of the films were edited for time or content to ensure that their placement with the master text would be flawless.

The interview subjects also were provided with a voice within the context of *Through Deaf Eyes*. Executive Producer Lawrence Hott questioned these individuals in order to present personal narratives on deaf life and the history of deafness in America. The stories that each subject told were their own memories in their own words. Despite the agency that this assumes, these recollections were guided by the questioning of one producer-author. The footage of each interview was then processed and coded, parsed and edited down in order to create a seamless flow of information that followed the storyline outlined by scriptwriter Ken Chowder.

The authorial structure of the production staff reinforces that these voices all have some degree of agency to represent the deaf experience within the film. Each author, no matter where they are included in the structure, is able to make their story known to some degree or another. Despite this, the distinguishing feature of this structure is the hierarchy that it represents. The self-representers, the filmmakers and interviewees, are able to tell their stories and present their view of deafness. For each presentation, these views are selected and discussed through collaboration between the advisor-authors and the producer-authors. Ultimately, the producer-authors have the final selection choice, determining which voices move the story along in the best ways, and they are able to edit

these perspectives down for time and content to ensure that the stories told are effective for the end goal of the presentation, balance.

## CONCLUSION

The organization of the production team for the film *Through Deaf Eyes* can be explored in a variety of ways. The two that have been explored in this chapter, the ‘dual organization model’ and the ‘authorship model’ present the complexity of the relationships of power and the practices of collaboration that occurred throughout the production of this film. These structures highlight some of the important features that are unique to public broadcasting, including the mandate that advisors from the cultural minority group be involved in the creation of the representation. Additionally, they explore some of the ways that the voices of personal experience are overshadowed based upon the intentions of the higher-level executive producers, those who have the industry experience to navigate the public broadcasting system and determine the expectations of viewing audiences.

The inclusion of self-representation through short presentations by ‘native’ filmmakers and through personal on-camera storytelling, anecdotes, and presentation of information provide a high degree of balance to the film, but also open the production up to the question, “why not more?” Experimentation with self-representation by the production team of *Through Deaf Eyes* provides adequate evidence that the deaf have the ability to present their life experiences for themselves, lacking only the access to the appropriate channels for mass distribution and reception. By acknowledging that deaf individuals are able to present their own stories, *Through Deaf Eyes*, opens the door to

greater calls of 'audism' or discrimination against the deaf, because if the deaf have the ability to present information, they should also have access.

## **THE FUTURE OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATION: SELF-REPRESENTATION AND AGENCY**

*Through Deaf Eyes* presents a unique perspective on deaf life in America. Through a historical framework it applies an objective view to how the modern deaf community came to be, a community that encourages use of its own language and fellowship with other deaf individuals over integration into the hearing world. The film contains a variety of techniques that serve to present a balanced view of the nature of deafness in America. *Through Deaf Eyes* utilizes the voices of many different perspectives within the deaf community through interviews and anecdotes, it seeks objectivity through presentation of historical information and imagery, and it even allows for a degree of ‘indigenous filmmaking’ through inclusion of film shorts created by deaf filmmakers. The decision-makers on this project, from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to individual executive producers and advisors were determined to make this film relevant and accessible to the deaf community by emphasizing the visual nature of the deaf culture and ensuring that the film would be accessible to deaf and hearing audiences alike.

The producers of this public broadcasting documentary understand the role of their film in creating public opinion about deafness and deaf culture and take this responsibility seriously by ensuring that controversies are presented in ways that clearly present information, but also balance current views in popular culture. CPB’s mandate for ‘balance’ and the mission of the public television institution to present accurate information served to create a film that highlighted the unique aspects of deaf culture without advocating for its further expansion. For each segment of the film, producers and

advisors collaborated to determine if the representations were too closely alighted to a single perspective or experience rather than a broad range. While *Through Deaf Eyes* does not perfect the art of representing culture, the techniques that were utilized show that experimentation and cautiousness can provide great leaps towards reflective, well-rounded, and accurate portrayals of cultural difference.

The deaf community is presented in popular culture through the controversies and conflicts that exist among its own people. *Through Deaf Eyes* also represents deafness through these contentious entry-points, the methods of educating deaf children, the treatment of the deaf as disabled, and the utility of technology to aid deaf people. Each of these topics were approached by the producers with careful attention to ‘balance’ whether in presenting a continuum of experiences, information on two opposing views, or depicting only one perspective that stands against commonly held ideas. The quest for equilibrium in deaf cultural representation does not uphold the transparency that is required in ethnographic production. Despite this, the relative success of the film at achieving ‘balance’ can open the minds of hearing people, educating a majority about the existence of a minority culture.

The documentary, *Through Deaf Eyes* achieves a higher degree of balance and openness because the collaboration between ‘native’ intellectuals and experienced filmmakers. The producers of the film created a complicated structure of authorship, collaboration, and hierarchy that allow for a multitude of voices from deaf scholars and activists, experienced filmmakers, and individuals who have lived the deaf experience. With a mandate by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to maintain balance in the perspectives and experiences of deafness, the highest level of authority within the

production team often exercised power in order to ensure that advisors and other authors of the film would not create too strong of a position within the film as promoting deaf culture and ASL use over oral methods, cochlear implants, and disability status for the deaf. While this power was exercised in the relationships between the many groups of authors, the acceptance of deaf people as the experts was never lost on the “hearing filmmakers making a film about the deaf.”

Although this study does not acknowledge the importance of the audience as an author of the film, they remain an unmentioned voice in the production team. The creators of this cultural representation considered the responses of different segments of the viewing population throughout the production process. Post-broadcast, the response to the film from the deaf community has been mainly positive, though there are criticisms on both ‘sides’ of the debates that the film provides stronger affiliation toward one side or the other. The interesting aspect of this response is that the filmmakers and advisors have acknowledged that each side has the same response to the film, that it is too closely aligned with the opposite perspective. Advocates of oralism believe that the film is too supportive of deaf culture and those identifying more closely with deaf cultural perspectives believe that there is too much attention provided to oral subjects and technologies. This discrepancy in itself provides evidence of a balance that is unprecedented in deaf cinema.

The final major call within the deaf community is for more self-representation. Bloggers and vloggers within the deaf community who provided online critique of *Through Deaf Eyes* are committed to the submission of personal experiences through video and text to be supplied in ‘the next version of the film’. With the level of access of

all Americans to computer technology, video equipment, and editing software and a relatively higher level of education associated with those who are active users of Internet technology, the call for the deaf to provide their own voices over the web, through film, and other mass media is not surprising. The sequel to *Through Deaf Eyes* is already present through a variety of blog and video sites including DeafVideo.tv and YouTube. The members of these sites produce narratives of deaf experience daily in American Sign Language and other world sign languages. However, for the next major televisual production to be broadcast on the small or big screen barriers to access will have to be broken down, providing greater equality to funding and distribution sources for deaf filmmakers to present their own deaf topics.

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